

Profiling the Romanian woman social entrepreneur: an analysis of the women's perspective in the social enterprises' sector *

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Abstract

The Romanian social economy includes a diversity of organizations and domains, adopting models of classic social enterprises, hybrid or sometimes even innovative models, many of them being initiated by women. Considering that women are very well represented in terms of gender distribution among social innovators, we propose exploratory research to profile the successful Romanian woman social entrepreneur, paying special attention to the women leading the Romanian emergent social enterprises sector. Our paper includes qualitative research based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven key successful women social entrepreneurs, nominated and/or awarded Romanian or European prizes in the field of social economy. Our investigations, also supplemented by a data processing and analysis of the Single Register of Evidence of Certified Social Enterprises in Romania from June 2022 concerning the involvement of women in the management of social enterprises, represent the first approach to this topic, contributing to understanding the profile of the Romanian woman social entrepreneur, and also offering an analysis of the women's perspective in the social enterprises' sector.

Keywords: social economy, social enterprise, woman social entrepreneur, Romania

JEL Codes: L3, O35

1. Introduction

CIRIEC Intl Report 2017 reveals that Romania's social economy sector is enjoying only a moderate level of recognition, coexisting alongside other concepts, such as the non-profit sector or the voluntary sector. Conceptual overlapping could also be met in the terms largely used (social entrepreneurship, social innovation, social economy, social and solidarity economy, social enterprises sector), but this is a normal characteristic of an emerging social economy, like the Romania case. However, the concept of the Social Economy begins to be drawn slowly as a fully-fledged socio-economic sector that covers a large spectrum of activities that create social impact and function with internal democratic governance systems.

The Romanian social economy includes a diversity of organizations and domains, adopting models of classic social enterprises and hybrid or sometimes even innovative models, many of which are initiated by women. For example, the best practices initiated by women from the Romanian social economy sector have been awarded at the European level by receiving recognition from the ERSTE Foundation Award for Social Integration, the Civil Society Prize awarded by the European Economic and Social Committee, or the European Social Economy Award. Another important reference that highlights the role of women in the social economy sector is the recently launched initiative of the Euclid Network on International Women's Day, 8th March 2022: the Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative, celebrating women in the social enterprise sector, spotlighting their impact journey and achievements, connecting them to learn from and inspire each other. Romania has two women included in 2022 Top (an experienced leader with a significant portfolio in the civic & social sector and a strategic leader in the social economy) and one woman in 2023 Top (a social worker with expertise in the coordination and implementation of training strategies in private and NGO field). According to the most recent Ashoka study (2022), "Romania's Social Innovators Map 2022", in Romania, women are very well represented in terms of gender distribution on the list of social innovators (63% compared to 36% men). In 2022, there is a significantly higher proportion of women appearing on the list of social innovators compared to 2017, when the gender distribution was more balanced, consisting of 53% women and 47% men social innovators. Education, Social Inclusion, Civic Engagement, Health, and Cross-Sectoral are fields dominated by women, according to Ashoka's study (2022). Therefore, the large Romanian social entrepreneurship ecosystem has a series of specific characteristics considering the strong empowerment of women in the field.

Understanding the evolution of the social economy sector in Romania is a difficult task, considering its complexity and dynamism, as well as the lack

of centralized evidence, statistics, and comprehensive research. However, the Social Economy Law No. 219 adopted in July 2015 (as amended and supplemented in 2022) defines the concepts of social economy and social enterprise. According to the Social Economy Law, in Romania, the *“social economy is the set of private activities of an economic and social nature, serving the general interest, the interests of a community and/or personal non-patrimonial interests, by increasing social inclusion and/or providing goods, services and/or works.”* The following categories of entities are recognized as part of the social economy (they can obtain the social enterprise certificate): cooperative societies, credit cooperatives, associations and foundations, mutual aid houses for employees and pensioners, agricultural societies, agricultural cooperatives, and any other category of legal entities, regardless of the field of activity, which complies, according to the legal acts of establishment and organization, cumulatively, with the definition and principles of the social economy laid down by the law. Also, Social Economy Law defines the social enterprise *“as any legal person governed by private law which carries out activities in the field of social economy and holds a social enterprise certificate.”* The certificate is granted based on the provision in the acts of establishment and operation of cumulative compliance with a set of criteria laid down by law: (i) act for a social purpose and/or in the general interest of the community; (ii) allocate at least 90% of the profit/surplus made to the social purpose and the statutory reserve; (iii) undertake to transfer the assets remaining after liquidation to one or more social enterprises; and (iv) apply the principle of social equity towards employees and administrators, ensuring fair wage/remuneration levels, between which there cannot be differences exceeding the ratio of 1 to 8.

Consequently, according to Romanian law, the social enterprise with certificate is subject to stricter “social” criteria than a social economy entity.

Considering the Romanian context of an emerging social economy, we have chosen to pay special attention to the women leading the Romanian emergent social enterprises sector, a sub-sector that is slowly expanding and is clearly regulated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Justice at the moment compared to other actors of the social economy. In our research, we will use the terms “social economy” and “social enterprise” as defined in the Social Economy Law No. 219, explained above. The term “social entrepreneur” is used only in the context of women with entrepreneurial initiatives (who started social enterprises), not in the broad sense and mindset of social entrepreneurship and social entrepreneur.

Given that Social Solidarity Economy (SEE) is still an emergent field in Romania and the public sector is just starting to recognize the added value of SSE

to community development in the context of the recent European Social Economy Action Plan, we consider it is important, and also it is the time to highlight the contribution and skills of women in the Romanian SSE sector. As stated in the Declaration for Gender Perspective in Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS, 2013), also in Romania, "gender needs to be a key issue in SSE, and women must be given the recognition for the work they do".

2. Women social entrepreneurs. A literature review

The social economy is a positive framework for women, providing them not only workplaces but also better incomes compared to alternatives, decent working conditions, even social services and protection (Baruah, 2023; Bergerson, 2023; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2021). In general, social enterprises provide women with more opportunities than for-profit businesses (British Council, 2018). Jeong and Yoo performed a rigorous recent systematic literature review of women in social entrepreneurship, advancing suggestions for future research in the field, such as reinterpretation of some theoretical concepts (e.g., "social innovation", "sustainability") from the perspective of women, social integration and overcoming gender discrimination, expansion of sectors and regions, and operation strategy and performance factors of women social entrepreneurs, paying attention to "collaboration" and "performance measurement" (Jeong & Yoo, 2022).

These are some of the reasons contributing to a high interest in women's social entrepreneurship among researchers investigating social entrepreneurship (Jeong & Yoo, 2022). For instance, cooperatives as social economy entities have proven effective support towards promoting gender equality as well as women's empowerment (ILO, 2015).

In some countries or regions, the female leadership in social enterprises is strong. This is the case, for instance, in Latin America (Guerra, 2010). This is not necessarily related to the specific development of social entrepreneurship but to the socio-economic and entrepreneurial peculiarities of those countries. Cultural values also play a role. For instance, the entrepreneurship tendency of women in Latin America is generally high due to a tendency to necessity entrepreneurship (Ivan, 2017). Another factor influencing the intention is the level of entrepreneurial awareness (Rokisa, 2019).

When considering the profile of entrepreneurs, we find a great variety of characteristics/segments. The profiles might be different considering cultural and economic backgrounds, regional specificities, and other aspects. This observation is also valid considering the profile of women social entrepreneurs.

Also, studies continue to reflect certain stereotypes when considering women's roles and characteristics associated with social entrepreneurship (Humbert, 2012).

Nevertheless, research presents some common traits for women social entrepreneurs. The first dimension to consider is related to motivations. While cultural values and education play a role, women are, in general, more socially aware and altruistic than men, observing a nesting effect in some countries (Ivan, 2017). Even gender inequality, which most commonly is biased against women, might offer them an additional incentive to get involved in social entrepreneurship to address various inequalities and social problems. In general, women are more open to addressing social or environmental problems, compared to men, as studies in the UK, US, Brazil, India, and Pakistan show (British Council, 2017). Also, women tend to wish to bring social change, to create social value for communities; therefore, they would be more open to assuming a social entrepreneurship approach rather than a for-profit entrepreneurship (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Nair, 2023). Motivation seems to be the most important factor in women's social entrepreneurship, overpassing intention or entrepreneurial characteristics (Malarkodi & Ali, 2018).

In Romania, studies show a higher interest in social entrepreneurship among women compared to men (Iancu, Popescu, & Popescu, 2021). Other existing studies discussed social entrepreneurs' traits and motivations, the acknowledged differences between social and business entrepreneurs, and the specific activities of social entrepreneurship, identifying the skills and qualities of a social entrepreneur as an agent of social change, but without having a gender perspective or a specific focus (Țigu, Iorgulescu, Răvar, & Lile, 2015; Demian, & Rebeleanu, 2018). Therefore, our research advances state-of-the-art in the existing Romanian studies concerning the women's social entrepreneur profile in Romania.

Women also tend to be more collaborative, either considering communities or stakeholders; therefore, they would prefer a form of social entrepreneurship and excel in it. For instance, cooperatives as alternative social economy business models support women's collective entrepreneurship (Bastida, Oliveira, & Vazquez Tain, 2022). Women tend to be more connected to ecosystems; therefore, the development of a more supportive ecosystem also gives additional impulse to women (social) entrepreneurs. Social connectivity and emotional capital tend to be aspects positively influencing women's social entrepreneurship (Fernandes & Pires, 2023).

At the same time, women's tendency towards pro-social motivation drives them towards alternative business models, such as social entrepreneurship (Halberstadt & Spiegler, 2018). A tendency of women to prefer lower-growing

sectors and social economy has been documented in some countries, such as Australia (Wade Institute, 2017). Having previous experience in the domain where the social enterprise is active also supports the intention (Malarkodi & Ali, 2018).

Becoming a social entrepreneur also offers women personal rewards. A study by the British Council (2018) shows that 75% of women social entrepreneurs feel better about themselves, while 64% experience increased self-confidence. Another study shows that 90% of women social entrepreneurs feel empowered, while 85% feel they contribute to empowering other women (Buckland & Cordobés, 2017). Other studies also show that women's social entrepreneurship contributes to empowering more women as well as supporting societal change (Nair, 2023).

Nevertheless, barriers that apply to women's entrepreneurship might also be relevant to women's social entrepreneurship. The most common barriers are gender bias, lack of visibility, fewer professional networks, lesser access to capital, and lower confidence (Wade Institute, 2017, p. 4). Still, the share of the female labour force in the solidarity and social economy is larger compared to the ordinary labour force, which implies the adoption of suitable public policies (OECD, 2023). For example, in Romania, there is evidence that some particular types of social economy units may better support their labour integration. From women's perspectives, such jobs provide professional development, acknowledgement, success and financial satisfaction, and the possibility to help people (Achimescu, Cace, Stanescu, 2011, p. 111).

3. Women empowerment in social enterprises. Data on entrepreneurial initiatives

The topic of women in social enterprises is under-explored, even if some sound works linked women entrepreneurs with social capital, social entrepreneurship, sustainable business initiatives, or even the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda (Yetim, 2008; Jeong & Yoo, 2022; Mas-Tur, 2022). Social economy offers women certain empowerment, following several approaches, as highlighted by Kamilla (2023): promoting gender equality, capacity building and skills development, access to resources – including financial –, networking and cooperation, and awareness. Nevertheless, aspects of gender inequality persist even in the social economy, especially concerning leadership structure (Bergerson, 2023).

According to GEM (Special Topic Social Entrepreneurship) 2016, of the world's social entrepreneurs, an estimated 55% are male, and 45% are women.

This gender gap is less pronounced than in commercial entrepreneurship. In Eastern Europe, GEM 2016 data reveals slightly higher participation of women in social entrepreneurship than the average: 49% are women within the group of entrepreneurs in the case of operational social entrepreneurship, and 46% are women within the group of entrepreneurs in the case of nascent social entrepreneurship. The percentages are also slightly higher than those in Western Europe (49% in Eastern Europe versus 45% in Western Europe and 46% in Eastern Europe versus 42% in Western Europe). Therefore, women are important vectors of the emergent social entrepreneurship sector in Eastern Europe. This is also the Romanian case, as the most recent Ashoka study (2022) has just revealed.

A recent OECD/European Commission report shows that while the gender gap has closed slightly over the past decade, it persists according to many metrics, for example, in business creation rates. There are also gender differences, on average, in entrepreneurship activities. Over the period 2016-2020, less than 5% of women in the EU were involved in creating a business or managing a new business relative to about 10% of men. This gap is due to several factors, including attitudes towards entrepreneurship and barriers such as access to finance and a lack of entrepreneurship skills (OECD/European Commission, 2021). The same report shows that this is in line with the fact that women entrepreneurs are less likely to operate in growth-oriented sectors and with a greater level of risk aversion, on average, and also identifies some patterns of which we mention that women are more likely to be “necessity” entrepreneurs in countries with high unemployment and informality rates (OECD/European Commission, 2021). In our opinion, these findings could be linked with a possible inclination of women towards social entrepreneurship initiatives, which respond to various community socio-economic needs and embrace the form of small social enterprises embedded in the local communities. On the other hand, recent studies showed that “flexible employment opportunities or specific services developed within social economy enterprises are innovative solutions designed to encourage work-life balance. The active participation in social economy enterprises has significant spillover effects on women's emancipation and claims-making in the public and domestic spheres” (Constantini & Sebillio, 2022, p. 6).

Generally, there is little data about women's involvement in social entrepreneurship across Europe. However, we mention some sound research works and reports highlighting higher participation of women in social enterprises than in traditional for-profit enterprises, opening the way for further research (Huysentruyt, 2014; European Women's Lobby, 2015; Empow'Her, 2019)

Referring to Romania, SELUSI (Social Entrepreneurs as Lead Users for Service Innovation) data showed since 2010 that in Romania, the ratio of female to male-run social enterprises is over 1 (1.86) – meaning there is a relative predominance of female-run over male-run social ventures (Huysentruyt, 2014, p. 6). SELUSI was a research project funded through the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission 2009-2011 that studied the market behaviours and organisational design decisions of over 600 social enterprises in five European countries, including Romania (Hungary, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom).

WEstart (2015), a highly relevant initiative of the European Women’s Lobby in the field investigating women’s social entrepreneurship in 12 EU countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Ireland, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK), highlighted the potential of women’s social entrepreneurship to contribute to socially impactful, sustainable revenue as well as job creation (Women’s Lobby, 2015) and created a first database of women-led social enterprises in Europe with information about 1,000 women-led social enterprises. Unfortunately, this initiative did not cover the Romanian case.

The recent study elaborated by Empow’Her (2019) targeted women social entrepreneurs established in 32 countries, and 72% of the responses came from 8 countries, including Romania (France, the UK, Germany, Spain, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Greece). Between the main motivations, needs, and difficulties faced by the women social entrepreneurs mentioned in this study are: for 63% of the respondents, creating a sustainable impact is their first motivation for starting a social business; 47% of the respondents cite the lack of funding as their main difficulty as social entrepreneurs; 63% believe that women’s lack of self-confidence inhibits their development as entrepreneurs; and 87% of the participants are willing to join in a program dedicated to women social entrepreneurs (Empow’Her, 2019, p. 11). Referring to Romania, a special issue was highlighted by this European report, which also provided insights into the disparities existing at the European level: in Romania, only 18% of the social entrepreneurs have received some support, compared to 91% in France (Empow’Her, 2019, p. 25). This indicated the need for an effective support ecosystem for social entrepreneurs in Romania, a problem that still needs to be solved.

Our research efforts concerning the data analysis regarding the certified social enterprises managed by women in Romania by processing the data included in the Single Register of Evidence of Certified Social Enterprises in Romania from June 2022 revealed a good representation of women in the management of

the social enterprises, almost equal representation with men: 48.3% of the managers of social enterprises were women compared to 51.7% men.

4. Research objectives and methodology

The main objective of our research is to define the profile of the successful Romanian woman social entrepreneur. The central research question is to investigate the intentions and motivations behind successful women social entrepreneurs in Romania while understanding the specific challenges for women social entrepreneurs in developing a social enterprise.

We defined the following exploratory research questions:

- Q1. Is the motivation for becoming a social entrepreneur related to the social needs that were the basis for establishing social enterprises?
- Q2. What is the educational and professional background of successful women social entrepreneurs?
- Q3. What are the values and principles of the social economy that determine the success of women social entrepreneurs?
- Q4. Are there any specific obstacles and/or incentives for women social entrepreneurs in Romania?

Our research is exploratory and advances state-of-the-art in the existing Romanian studies concerning the social entrepreneur profile in Romania by focusing on the women's perspective in the social enterprises' sector.

Qualitative research was carried out based on interviews with successful Romanian women social entrepreneurs. In the initial interview design, we identified the main interview questions concerning the profile of the woman social entrepreneur (what her motivations are, characteristics, as well as contextual factors influencing her involvement). After a critical reflection, we decided to use a semi-structured approach to allow additional questions if an interesting new line of inquiry appears during the interviews. We formulated 14 interview questions.

Data gathering began with identifying the interviewees: successful women social entrepreneurs from Romania. We developed a robust sampling strategy, using the key informant sampling strategy – targeting key successful women social entrepreneurs as much as possible. This concluded in a sample of 7 interviewees, included in the Top of the most nominated social innovators and supporters or who received a substantial number of nominations (Ashoka, 2022), included in the Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative (Euclid Network, 2022), but

also winners of European awards in the field of social economy. All of them were directly involved in social enterprise startups. We mention that Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative is based on answers from an open nomination call and an assessment by a reputed jury. The women listed in Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative stood out as having implemented creative and sustainable solutions to create significant positive social and/or environmental impact. They demonstrated outstanding leadership skills and commitment by going beyond their role and inspiring others to channel their potential. Similarly, Ashoka's Top of the most nominated social innovators is based on identification of the social entrepreneurs made by their peers as key, influential people that are contributing to a better society.

The interviewees selected (Table 1) covered various regions from Romania: Bucharest – Ilfov (1 person), North-East region (2 persons), North-West region (1 person), West region (1 person), South-East region (1 person) and South-West Oltenia (1 person), the sample being representative in terms of geographical coverage. We applied for ethical clearance, all the interviewees being properly informed on issues such as the aims of the research and how their data will be used in the Informed Consent. In the Informed Consents, the interviewees permitted us to make their personal and organizational identity public in the study and subsequent research articles and to cite excerpts from the interviews. The interviews took place in February – April 2023, were carried out online, using videoconference platforms, and were followed by a manual transcription. We performed a thematic analysis and discussion of findings based on scheme contents, clustering key issues from the information obtained in four main thematic units: motivations for social enterprise startup, determinants of social entrepreneurship intention, the development of social enterprise, and special issues concerning women in social enterprises.

Table 1. The sample description

	Social Entrepreneur	Affiliation	Awards (selection)
1	Angela Achitei (15+ years of experience in SE)	Foundation "Alături de Voi" (ADV) <i>UtilDeco</i> <i>Job Direct</i> <i>Wise Travel</i> AFIN Finance for doing good	Top Innovators Social Inclusion - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative 2022 ADV in the first 3 finalists of Social Economy Awards 2021, Social Innovation Category 2019 - 1st Award for the WISE.travel project at the Civil Society Gala, within the "Economic and Social Growth Section" "Social Entrepreneur Of The Year" Prize in 2017
2	Diana Certan (15+ years of experience in SE)	Concordia Humanitarian Organization <i>Concordia Bakery</i> <i>Bread&Breakfast Hostel</i> <i>Concordia Vocational School</i> Foundation New Horizons <i>Social Campus</i>	Top Innovators Social Inclusion - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 2020 - The Concordia Bakery received the 1st prize in the "Economic and Social Development" category, and the Concordia Vocational School received the 2nd place in the "Social Inclusion" category at the Civil Society Gala 2018 - The Ministry of Labor and Social Justice awarded five social services of the Humanitarian Organization Concordia as models of good practice in the "100 Examples of good practices in social services in Romania" Gala
3	Ancuța Vameșu (10+ years of experience in SE)	Association Solidarity Laboratory Romanian Network of Social Enterprises for Insertion through Economic Activity (RISE) AFIN Finance for doing good	Top Innovators Socio-Economic Development - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative 2022

4	Roxana Damaschin-Tecu (10+ years of experience in SE)	NESsT "Pentru Voi" Foundation "Ceva de Spus" (strategic partner for UnLoc) <i>UnLoc</i> <i>OilRight</i> "Borcanul cu ulei" (strategic partner for OilRight)	Top Innovators Social Inclusion - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 Eisenhower Fellow for Romania, în 2012
5	Anca Elena Gheorghică (15+ years of experience in SE)	"Mai Bine" Association <i>CUIB</i> <i>Redu</i>	Nominated Innovator – Social-Economic Development - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 2023 - The Urban Center for Good Initiatives - winner of the Edible Cities Network Awards
6	Anna Burtea (20+ years of experience in SE)	Heart of a Child Foundation <i>Workshops with Soul</i>	Nominated Innovator – Social Inclusion - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 2015 - Heart of a Child Foundation – first prize at Civil Society Gala
7	Oana Mîndruț (less than 5 years of experience in SE)	"Life Education for All" Association <i>"Natura Vie" Association</i>	Nominated Innovator – Education - Ashoka Social Innovators Map 2022 2022 – The E-Commerce Awards Gala - Prize for the best online store ("Startup" category) 2022 – Gala Club Entrepreneur - Prize for educating consumers and promoting organic products 2019 – Gala "People for people" – Prize for the best project of a small NGO 2016 – Gala International Solidarity – Prize for International Volunteer

A secondary research objective is to perform a first data analysis concerning the involvement of women in the management of certified social enterprises in Romania.

This data analysis was based on processing by the authors of the data included in the Single Register of Evidence of Certified Social Enterprises in Romania from

June 2022, available online on the National Agency for Employment website. The National Employment Agency administers the register to ensure the necessary information regarding the situation and evolution of social enterprises at the national level, based on Law 219/2015 on the social economy. Data processing allowed us to obtain the first basic descriptive statistics for frequency distribution, summarizing women's involvement in managing the certified social enterprises' sector in Romania.

5. Profiling the Romanian successful woman social entrepreneur. Discussion of findings

Based on an in-depth analysis of the interviews, we write up the main characteristics of the successful Romanian women social entrepreneur. The 14 interview questions were grouped into four thematic units: motivations for social enterprise startup (clustering issues related to the startup moment and context, motivations, social needs identification, and social entrepreneurs' role models), determinants of social entrepreneurship intention (clustering issues related to work experience, education & skills, the traits of the women social entrepreneurs and traits of success), the development of social enterprise (clustering issues related to social capital, role models, financing, general obstacles, and incentives) and special issues concerning women in social enterprises (clustering issues related to work-life balance, specific barriers or incentives for women social entrepreneurs, and identification of women with social economy field).

5.1 Motivations for social enterprise startup

The interviews revealed the stories and the initial main challenges of the successful women entrepreneurs interviewed and confirmed an important characteristic of the social economy in Romania: the social economy is mainly embedded in the NGO sector, the entrepreneurial NGO being a common social enterprise model in Romania. We specify that associations and foundations (known under the umbrella name of NGO) are private organizations, formal, voluntary and autonomous, established according to Ordinance no. 26 of 2000, as amended and subsequent additions, and carry out activities in the general interest or in the interest of some local communities or, as the case may be, in the non-patrimonial personal interest of the members. Associations and foundations can carry out any other direct economic activities, if they have

accessory character and are closely related to the main purpose of the legal entity.

Most women social entrepreneurs interviewed were involved in social enterprises startups in an NGO and benefitted from the support of the NGO team (e.g., Angela Achitei established their first three social enterprises within the "Alături de Voi" Foundation, Anca Elena Gheorghică established three social enterprises within the "Mai Bine" Association, Diana Certan developed two social enterprises within Concordia Humanitarian Organization, Oana Mândruț developed her social startup within the Life Education for All Association, and Anna Burtea developed her social startup within the Heart of Child Foundation). Some of the interviewees were even founders of the mentioned NGOs. On the other hand, some successful women social entrepreneurs interviewed have complex profiles of social innovators, such as Ancuța Vameșu and Angela Achitei, well-known Romanian social innovators also recognized at the European level. Alternatively, they are persons with a sound experience from previous work in social enterprise support organizations and replicated successful models of social businesses from other countries, as is the case of Roxana Damaschin, who developed a social enterprise by replicating an innovative functional model from Slovenia to sustain a social program dedicated to persons with disabilities by offering them job opportunities. It is remarkable that in the Romanian emergent sector of social economy, we have many women social entrepreneurs recognized at the European level, for example, Ancuta Vameșu and Angela Achitei being included Top 100 Women in Social Enterprise Initiative 2022 and also receiving other relevant awards. Their stories are outstanding: Ancuța Vameșu was involved in the foundation of many social enterprises in rural areas, working in various financing programs for social enterprises as a facilitator of social business creation and also having the role of financier, and recently she developed a non-banking financial enterprise that obtained a certificate of social enterprise; Angela Achitei succeeded to build a group of social enterprises around the "Alături de Voi" Foundation (ADV) and its three social centers, which continued to grow up and to promote social economy as a business model for future entrepreneurs by new initiatives such as ADV Academy or Social Enterprises Accelerator, contributing to the development of the social economy sector in Romania.

The motivations for starting social enterprises and becoming social entrepreneurs mentioned in interviews are mainly related to the desire to help people in need (e.g., street addicts and HIV-positive children abandoned in the local hospitals, young people who leave the institutionalized child protection system, people with disabilities, or people from rural, disadvantaged areas), but also the desire to create new sustainable alternatives, or the desire

to further the mission of the initial founded NGO and to diversify the types of incomes of the organization.

In most cases, the motivations overlap with identifying the social needs which were the basis for establishing the social enterprises. They met the social need in the NGO's current activities or other previous activities, and they wanted to change the existing situation. Some of them could be characterized as real changemakers, for example, Anca Elena Gheorghică, who promoted new paradigms such as human ecology and responsible consumption, or Ancuța Vameșu, who promoted the social economy in rural areas characterized by a lack of jobs, services and financial resources for people with fewer opportunities. The interview with Angela Achiței brought challenging insights concerning social needs in Romania and not only: the need for integrated social services (social assistance, psychological and personal development, qualification), the need for packages of socio-professional insertion services, and even the need for the social economy sector because of the discrepancies due to economic models that no longer correspond to people's needs.

Some interviewees were inspired by certain social entrepreneur models (e.g., Mohamad Yunus was mentioned two times), others mentioned various social initiatives or organizations seen in other countries or studied in Ph.D. or Master studies (e.g., energy cooperatives in Belgium, Banca Etica in Italy, Oxfam International, Indian social entrepreneurs fighting poverty), or even professors from the university. In one case, the social enterprise created in Romania replicated the Slovenian Oilright social business model.

The findings of our study confirm that successful Romanian women social entrepreneurs have the typical traits identified in other existing international studies for women social entrepreneurs: e.g., they are socially aware (Ivan, 2017), they are open to addressing critical social and environmental problems (British Council, 2017), and they are committed to bringing social change in their communities (Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2016; Nair, 2023). Also, motivation seems to be the most important factor in women's social entrepreneurship (Malarkodi & Ali, 2018).

"In 2008, I became a social entrepreneur because we failed to hire people on the labor market, and then we said to hire them ourselves to become financially independent. Thus, I found myself a social entrepreneur. It was not something I specifically wanted - I wanted to help people, and then I discovered that this desire is called social entrepreneurship". (Angela Achiței)

"I responded to the need to create alternatives for responsible consumption, which would increase the positive social impact and decrease the negative impact on the environment". (Anca Elena Gheorghică)

"I inclined to this human and social side. My profession is a doctor, and in the faculty, I volunteered in a Section for HIV-positive children. It was simply the desire to help, and we said let's do it in an organized setting". (Anna Burtea)

5.2 Determinants of social entrepreneurship intention

All respondents have substantial work experience in the NGO sector. They worked in associations or foundations that provide social and/or educational services to vulnerable people (e.g., people with disability, young people who left the child protection system, HIV-positive children, etc.). Involvement in writing and implementing various social projects and startup initiatives is another aspect that contributed to the acquisition of skills further used in the field of social economy.

Currently, there are no Bachelor's degree studies in social economy in Romania. Only two Master programs are working. This is why many respondents have a Bachelor's degree in a related field (e.g., economy, public administration, social work) or are not directly connected with the domain (e.g., medical studies or journalism).

Some of them followed master-level programs in Romanian or abroad; some mentioned professional MBA programs, which also included modules related to social economy. Only one person has a master's level in social economy. In their opinion, in that context, the most valuable professional training comes from the courses in the field of social entrepreneurship and social economy held by training organizations in the country, which in fact, set the scene in training & capacity building in Romania in the social economy (e.g., Social Economy Institute - a program of the Civil Society Development Foundation, NESsT) and also from sound international programs in the field (e.g., management of social enterprises at EURICSE, Trento, Italy). Participation at relevant international and national conferences in the field, collaboration with other international or national NGOs or social enterprises, or previous experience in organizational development interventions have also been important contributions in improving skills competencies in social entrepreneurial skills.

All women social entrepreneurs mention flexibility, empathy, opening to continuous learning, perseverance, and creativity as essential traits of social entrepreneurs.

"to want to learn on the go, flexibility, keep the balance between business and social dimension of social enterprises" (Diana Certan)

"flexibility, want to learn all the time, empathy, determinism, perseverance, patience, ..." (Anna Burtea)

"adaptability, flexibility...many hats/roles that social entrepreneur changes throughout the day" (Roxana Damschin Tecu)

The existence of vision regarding economic activity and social mission, professional and personal ethics, a risk-taker attitude, courage, communication skills, and the traits of a good manager are also mentioned by the respondents as social entrepreneurship skills.

"...values and attitudes are the keys. To be a good manager for human resources and economic resources. ... professional and personal ethics..courage (when you throw yourself in unknown)." (Ancuta Vameşu)

"very important are the clarity of the vision and mission of the created business mandate and the values which you work" (Roxana Damaschin Tecu)

"courage (many unforeseen things occur), determinism, vision on the long term..." (Oana Mîndruţ)

"special social consciousness ...focused on the people, involvement in civic and volunteering..." (Angela Achiţei)

Combining business with the social mission of the social enterprise is relevant for sustainability, especially because Romania is the country where civil society organizations have the least support (Hollerweger, Bogorin, Litofcenko & Meyer, 2019). The interviews revealed that social entrepreneurs must be creative and innovative to search for and activate resources for activities.

Synthesizing, all the women social entrepreneurs interviewed are agents of change in the communities in which they live, promoting social innovation. Our research findings confirm the women's tendency towards pro-social motivation highlighted in existing international studies, which drives them towards alternative business models, such as social entrepreneurship (Halberstadt & Spiegler, 2018). They are the persons who recognize a problem and use the principles of entrepreneurship to organize, create and structure a business to initiate social change. Business deals with social well-being in their cases. They demonstrated they used their inspiration, creativity, and courage to generate benefits for the target group and society in general.

"Social entrepreneurship "takes the cream from both worlds - business and non-profit. It has both dimensions – economic and social, and it challenges you on both. You have profit in mind, the idea of being competitive, having quality, productivity, and everything that a business's dynamism entails (...), but all this happens to have a good impact around you. That's the beauty of it."
(Roxana Damaschin - Tecu)

Traits of success in social entrepreneurship perceived by the Romanian women social entrepreneurs interviewed are connected with personal and professional experience. Empathy, openness to innovation, courage, perseverance, optimism, creativity, motivation to help people in need and solve social problems, and risk taker attitude, are frequently mentioned by respondents. Concerning the risk-taker attitude, Weerawardena & Mort (2006, p. 29) point out that non-profit organizations that develop social entrepreneurship activities face great challenges in risk management to support the organization and the projects carried out. This fact aligns with our findings from the interviews with women social entrepreneurs emerging that risk taker is one of the most important success traits.

"I like to start new things..I don't feel afraid..I find the greatest joy in the new beginning" (Ancuta Vameşu)

"empathy, perseverance, opening to new things ...I liked seeing that we can do more, better ..and differently" (Anna Burtea)

"I'd like to think with my mind, I document myself a lot, I'm creative, sometimes a deaf frog – I believed in a field where others didn't give a chance, many don't believe that we could work with disable people" (Angela Achiței)

"the motivation to contribute to solving problems and to prove that this also can be done in different situations" (Roxana Damaschin Tecu)

5.3 Development of social enterprise

The will to establish a social enterprise is not enough. At least some funding is necessary for such an endeavour. In many cases, the social enterprises benefited from a grant supporting the social economy in Romania. But in most cases, the budget available from the grant is not enough, being complemented with the funding of the entrepreneurs, sometimes crowdfunding. In some cases, cooperation with organizations abroad was positive. For one of the social enterprises, the initiative was financed by an American charity that operated

previously in Romania and, before withdrawing, helped establish local organizations to continue the charitable work. In other cases, foreign organizations have been models and consultants, without direct financial support.

Continuing to finance the activity remains a challenge for most organizations considered. To stay fit for the market, they have to implement a mixed recipe of accessing grants, selling goods and services, and even crowdsourcing in some cases. Having a professional marketing strategy adapted to the specificity of the market and coping with the competition seems to be a success factor for ensuring the necessary funding for successful sustainable operations.

Establishing a successful organization depends on many factors. Among them are the vision and the business model. Therefore, following an established effective model, and being inspired by a role model might contribute to successful organizations. Most of the stories shared by the interviewees reflect a common feature – all interviewed social entrepreneurs are alert in observing good models, but they adapt and develop successful practices for the local contexts.

Another success factor for all organizations, both considering their establishment and consequent development, is the social capital, mostly associated with their networking strategies. Especially in the initial stages, personal networks have been considered important, but also the consulting offered in association with the initial grants was mentioned by some of the entrepreneurs interviewed. One of the interviewees specified the lack of initial mentoring as an important factor. Most of the organizations are part of various formal networks, which give them access to information, good practices, and assistance in some cases. The approach of ADV needs to be highlighted. Not only that, among the cases considered, it is the most connected organization, part of many national and European associations. But ADV is also the (co-)initiator of the Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations for International Development Assistance, the Coalition for Structural Funds, the Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations for Social Services, and the Romanian Network of Social Insertion Enterprises (RISE). Therefore, our research findings are in line with the results of previous studies that highlighted that women tend to be more connected to ecosystems, and the development of a more supportive ecosystem also gives additional impulse to women (social) entrepreneurs. (Fernandes & Pires, 2023).

Speaking of social framework and the cooperation climate, some organizations also mentioned a negative perception on the part of possible partners and clients for the services and goods developed by the social enterprises. For instance, some businesses and part of the general public are skeptical about working

with social enterprises, considering that their employees are not professional and the results of their work are not reliable and/or of quality compared with products offered by businesses following traditional capitalist models. Specific mentalities and the lack of understanding of what a social enterprise is, as well as of its role in society, were mentioned as barriers both to the establishment and to the development of such organizations.

Reflecting on the barriers related to the establishment and the development of the organizations, the interviewees referred to different aspects – connected with their specific context and domain of activity. The older organizations mentioned the lack of a legislative framework and the need to adapt to the changes in legislation. They also mentioned that the present framework is not supportive enough and still progress has to be made. Also, some interviewees mentioned some other dimensions of the legislation negatively impacting them, for instance, the one referring to recycling.

Other systemic barriers mentioned were a lack of understanding of this type of organisation, even by those active in the sector; lack of support of the local authorities who could integrate the social enterprise sector to support sustainable local development; the lack of responsibility assumed by the social entrepreneurs to contribute to the healthy development of the sector overall by fulfilling their missions outside their “walls”; unsupportive mentalities not only at the societal level but also sectoral and even organisational, as well as unsupportive work-relationships inside these organizations; a low dynamism of the sector which does not offer enough opportunities for the existing operations – most of these aspects have been mentioned by Ancuța Vameșu, an important mentor and consultant, not only a militant for the social economy but also a factor of change in the sector. Most of the other entrepreneurs interviewed concentrated on more operative aspects. Probably the most complex identification of the challenges was presented by Angela Achiței, representing one of the oldest, largest, and most diversified social enterprise initiatives operating in more regions of Romania. The challenges presented by the interviewees are very diverse: difficulties in communicating both with beneficiaries and with organizational partners related to the lack of understanding of the social dimension of a social enterprise; mistrust in the capacity of such organizations to successfully fulfill their contracts and with regards to the quality of products and services they offer, ensuring a competitive offer – including from a financial perspective – while coping with the social responsibilities assumed by social enterprises; access to financing and support programs. Overall, interviewees perceive that the status of social enterprise not only does not present a competitive advantage but is, in some cases, perceived as a disadvantage for successful operations.

"Personal networks played a role; we were a small nucleus, a group of people who set out to do something (together) because, anyway, it's very hard to do something alone. So the role of this core was quite important in the beginning because we supported each other, we wanted to do something for the respective children, and we shared common values. That mattered a lot." (Anna Burtea)

"There are two types of support networks that we work with or are involved in. The first category of networks is that we have created; we are founding members. (...) After that comes the second category of networks which we joined because we knew we could have added value through the knowledge and information we have access to, but also because we could pass on the information from the grassroots." (Angela Achiței)

"There (in the RISE network), there were large and old organizations with experience in social entrepreneurship... for example ADV, Ateliere fără frontiere...). I learned a lot from interacting with them (...), and I understood how important the role of a support network is." (Oana Mîndruț)

"We don't do fundraising campaigns in the community because we want people to see us as service providers and actually buy our products and services. And that's why we strongly promote socially responsible purchasing. You also need to look at what value your money is generating in addition to the product or service purchased." (Angela Achiței)

"I think it's a lack of understanding, in the general economic context, even on the part of those who support the sector. There is a lot of confusion. There are not very clear and complete measures for these enterprises to be understood and accepted. (...)" (Ancuța Vameșu)

5.4 Women and social enterprises

Interviewed women considered social entrepreneurship to be a field specific to women mainly due to, on the one hand, a better representation of them in the social field in general. On the other hand, the characteristics of women mainly focus on *"the natural inclination of women to take care of those around them"* (Anca Elena Georghică). Interviews revealed that men are also present in social entrepreneurship due to their general appetite for running a business, particularly a social one.

Taking into account specific obstacles for women social entrepreneurs compared with men, opinions of interviewed women were shared between the ones considering no gender differences and the ones identifying them. Regarding the last category, respondents considered that men have a more business-oriented

professional profile while women posed a specific social DNA supporting them to be more involved in social aspects of the social initiatives. Besides, women social entrepreneurs have to tackle their specific work-life responsibilities in a different, more intensive way than their men entrepreneurs colleagues. In terms of general obstacles, one is related to the still small openness of local authorities to proceed with various legal documents necessary for running the social enterprise, to answer various relevant questions, and in general, to respect the legal datelines for various procedures. Secondly, work-life balance is a major obstacle confronted by women social entrepreneurs. In terms of incentives, they have appreciated that no financial incentives are generally regulated for social enterprises. However, the personal satisfaction of seeing changes as the impact of their social activity matters most.

Work-life balance is a permanent challenge for women running social initiatives active in the social economy field as it is time-consuming. Opinions are shared among respondents in this delicate personal matter with a better representation of the ones who did not successfully balance the two dimensions. The involvement of family members in specific social economy activities represents a strong bond in finding this equilibrium (e.g., husband supporting business-related startup decisions, son involved in social economy activities). Besides, social decisions follow personal choices, as one social entrepreneur shared her recent experience in adopting a girl and the ongoing adaptation process. Other social entrepreneurs supported her son's involvement in social economy-specific activities. The other two respondents with families are not sure if they completely understand their social work and dedication.

"It's a suitable field for anyone who wants to build something for good and understands the business side. A man or a woman can be equally successful. The sector is predominantly female, and she believes that this is explained by the fact that the sector developed from the NGO area, where women predominate." (Diana Certan)

"In general, the area of social entrepreneurship is more occupied by women - they have this social DNA. I believe that the social entrepreneur must have a social DNA - we find a pattern in the people of social entrepreneurship. Women have this DNA by design." (Angela Achiței)

"It is a little more suitable for women (...), but I think it's just as suitable for men with similar structure and values who value relationships, empathy, and support for those who need it. (...) It is not very easy to attract them, however. It is not very easy." (Anna Burtea)

6. Conclusions

We conclude our journey with the inspirational stories of the successful women social entrepreneurs interviewed by proposing a profile of a successful Romanian woman social entrepreneur. Based on the thematic units used in our research, the following table summarizes the key traits and characteristics of successful women social entrepreneurs, considering the dominant discourse in the interviews and also highlighting as much as possible outstanding views and qualities that set them apart from other entrepreneurs.

Table 2. Synthesis of the results research

<i>Thematic units</i>	<i>Successful Woman Social Entrepreneur – main findings:</i>
<i>Motivations for social enterprise startup</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Context – dominant discourse:</i> involved in social enterprise startups in an NGO. ✓ <i>Motivations:</i> to help people in need, to create new sustainable alternatives, or to further the mission of the initially founded NGO and to diversify the types of incomes of the organization. ✓ <i>The motivations overlap with identifying the social needs</i> which were the basis for establishing the social enterprises. ✓ <i>Role models:</i> inspired by certain social entrepreneur models, by other social initiatives and organizations, or by professors from the university.
<i>Determinants of social entrepreneurship intention</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Work experience:</i> in non-profit organizations, in social programs and projects. ✓ <i>Education & skills:</i> post-graduate studies, not necessary in the field of SE or related; the most valuable: lifelong learning -professional training in the social entrepreneurship and SE. ✓ <i>Characteristics:</i> empathy, to have a vision on long term, flexibility, brave, perseverance, patience, optimism, intuition, communication skills, continuous learning, clear ethical values and attitudes, and the capability to create a balance between business and social dimensions of the social enterprises, a good manager. ✓ <i>Traits of success:</i> a risk-taker attitude, courage, the existence of a vision, strong values and attitudes, capability and patience to motivate people/team, motivation to help people in need and solve social problems, openness to innovation, empathy, perseverance, optimism, creativity.

<i>The development of social enterprise</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Social capital & networks:</i> personal networks in the initial stages, formal networks in SE. ✓ <i>Financing:</i> grants supporting the social economy and co-funding of the entrepreneurs, crowdfunding, grants from foreign organizations. ✓ <i>General obstacles and incentives:</i> the present framework is not supportive enough, systemic barriers (e.g., a lack of understanding of SE, lack of support of the local authorities, etc.), operational barriers (e.g., mistrust in the capacity of such organizations to successfully fulfill their contracts and with regards to the quality of products and services they offer, etc.).
<i>Women and social enterprises</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>Pro-women arguments:</i> the feminisation of social field in general, their personal characteristics. ✓ <i>Successful work-life balance:</i> involvement of family members in running the business model or in social economy-specific activities. ✓ <i>Unsuccessful work-life balance:</i> priority toward professional life. ✓ <i>Special obstacles for women:</i> men have a more business-oriented professional profile; women social entrepreneurs have to tackle their specific work-life responsibilities in a different, more intensive way compared with men; dominant discourse for barriers - no gender differences. ✓ <i>Incentives for women:</i> no specific incentives.

Our research revealed that successful women social entrepreneurs are innovative, oriented towards solving challenging social problems, have or know where to look for resources, and are valuable creators. All successful women social entrepreneurs are a powerful engine for inclusive growth, having, through their work, a strong social impact on their beneficiaries and the communities they are part of. They are the reformers of today's society, grounding their efforts on the essential component of social solidarity.

The above social enterprising profile is, first of all, a way of thinking. It is a special entrepreneurial mindset, considering the realities of an emerging social economy sector, as is Romania's case. Factors of success in the case of social women entrepreneurs interviewed are their special qualities such as openness for learning, a risk-taker attitude, courage, the existence of a vision, strong values, and attitudes, but first of all, the motivation to help people in need and

solve social problems. They demonstrated they had a vision of the change they wanted to create, and a strong motivation to pursue it. Their stories revealed common problems in Romania that have been solved, for instance the precariousness of social services or the low employment rate of vulnerable people. Additionally, they built strong teams and networks, fostering a culture of innovation and adaptation, and succeeding in communicating their impact to the large public, both social and environmental.

The study aided in pinpointing solutions to the research inquiries, successfully achieving all objectives. Therefore, referring to the exploratory research question 1 of our study (*Q1. Is the motivation for becoming a social entrepreneur related to the social needs that were the basis for establishing social enterprises?*), we can state that in the case of successful Romanian women social entrepreneurs the motivation for becoming a social entrepreneur is strongly related to the social needs that were the basis for establishing social enterprises. Concerning the exploratory research question 2 of our study (*Q2. What is the educational and professional background of successful women social entrepreneurs?*), we can conclude that we cannot highlight a specific educational background for successful women social entrepreneurs, but we can define a specific professional background related to substantial work experience in the NGO sector mainly dedicated to social services for vulnerable people. For the third exploratory research question (*Q3. What are the values and principles of the social economy that determine the success of women social entrepreneurs?*) we can summarize that values of solidarity clearly drive the successful Romanian social entrepreneurs' activity, the primacy of people and the social mission over capital, and democratic and participative governance. The integration of these values and principles in their entrepreneurial behavior and in the management of the current activity of the social enterprise is what determined their success. Finally, research findings referring to the exploratory research question 4 (*Q4. Are there any specific obstacles and/or incentives for women social entrepreneurs in Romania?*) reveal no strong specific obstacles for women compared to men, besides the challenge of work-life balance. The identified obstacles are mainly related to the characteristics of an emerging sector of the social economy, as it is in the case of Romania, not sufficiently understood and supported by the public authorities and without any type of incentives for social entrepreneurs regardless of their gender.

Compared to other profiles of women social entrepreneurs mentioned in international existing studies, we can conclude that successful Romanian women social entrepreneurs have the same traits of success built around the strong values and principles of social and solidarity economy and around motivation as the most important factor in their entrepreneurial decision.

Their motivations overlap with identifying the social needs which were the basis for establishing social enterprises. Considering the stage of social economy development in Romania, we can discuss a certain similar pattern to the situation of the countries from Latin America, as the interviews revealed the same tendency to “necessity” entrepreneurship (Ivan, 2017) in the case of successful women social entrepreneurs. This is also in line with the OECD and European Commission's assumptions referring to the fact that women are more likely to be “necessity” entrepreneurs in countries with high unemployment and informality rates (OECD/European Commission, 2021); that is also the case of Romania. Some particular aspects of the successful Romanian woman social entrepreneur also emerged from our findings: a substantial work experience in the NGO sector (in associations or foundations that provide social and/or educational services to vulnerable people), detrimental to another widespread pattern - the cooperatives, that in other countries worldwide have proven effective support towards women's empowerment and collective entrepreneurship (ILO, 2015; Bastida et al., 2022). This is explained by the fact that in Romania, cooperatives have faced an “identity crisis” marked by the passing from the “state and cooperative property” to the market economy and also a double challenge - a problem of perception from the population, because of the communist period when agriculture cooperatives were based on forced collectivization of lands (Petrescu, C., 2013) and a general ignorance of the advantages of these organization forms for meeting particular type of current socioeconomic roles and needs. These barriers slow down their development and must be overcome to create the path towards territorial, locally-based development in Romania (Barna, C. & Vameşu, A., 2014).

This study represents the first step in our research concerning the topic. A further broader approach by extending the sampling beyond the nominations from the two mentioned tops would make possible to better substantiate the instrument for measuring success of women social entrepreneurs. Another new research direction is a specific sub-topic concerning women's social entrepreneurs' management models. Starting from the profile of successful woman entrepreneur identified in this paper, we aim as research results to have a deep understanding of the characteristics of their management models, analysing women social entrepreneurs - specific approaches to organizational change, social innovation, and change creation. Also, further research will be done to reveal how women's social entrepreneurship can advance in Romania, linking the characteristics of the defined profile in this paper with specific attributes of the innovative social economy organizations models not well represented yet in Romania at the moment (e.g., green social entrepreneurship, renewable energy communities, circular social entrepreneurship, health mutuals, cultural, social entrepreneurship, etc.). Referring to new data,

further research using a survey by questionnaire is envisaged to see the level of women direct involvement in the initiation of the social enterprises, as the Register of Evidence of Certified Social Enterprises in Romania includes data referring only to the manager of the social enterprise.

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