CASE STUDY

7 Social Enterprises and Economic Empowerment of Women in Ghana

Patricia Blankson Akakpo
Network for Women's Rights in Ghana (NETRIGHT)

Introduction

Women's empowerment and gender equality are key to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), not only as goals in and of themselves but also as a means to achieve sustainable societies for all. The private sector is increasingly being recognised as a driver of economic growth and a promoter of sustainable social development, with businesses being held to account for their impact on societies. Traditionally, development efforts were primarily driven by governments and international organisations. However, the recognition of the private sector as a key development actor has led to a shift towards engaging businesses as key partners in development initiatives. Many private entities claim to contribute to sustainable development through their programs under public-private partnerships, impact investment, or corporate social responsibility.

Despite growing attention to gender equality in business and human rights, women continue to be more likely to experience a disproportionate burden of adverse business-related impacts and are less likely to share in the benefits generated by business activities. This is due to the structural discrimination and exclusion that characterise societies, driven by imbalances in power, wealth and resources. These structural inequalities are often made worse by business models and gender-neutral practices that reproduce inequalities or are complicit in maintaining the status quo.[1]

Strengthening women's agency to participate fully in economic life is critical to building strong economies, establishing more stable and just societies, achieving internationally agreed goals for development, sustainability, and human rights, and improving the quality of life for families and communities.[2] Multi-stakeholder partnerships are critical to accelerating progress if we are to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment under the 2030 Agenda.

Regional and Country Context

In recent years, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment by the private sector in Africa with many companies working to promote women's economic participation, leadership, and inclusion across value chains. Nonetheless, significant challenges remain, including cultural norms, discriminatory practices, and limited access to resources, which hinder women's full participation and hinder the realisation of gender equality goals.

Decades of research by feminist economists have made it clear that crises are not gender-neutral. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened pre-existing inequalities and exposed vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems that exacerbated its impact on marginalised sectors. Measures to contain the pandemic had significant ripple effects on women's employment and livelihoods, as well as on an already beleaguered care economy.[3]

[1] Business & Human Rights Resource Centre. (n.d.). Gender, Business & Human Rights. https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/big-issues/gender-business-human-rights/.
[2] United Nations Women. (2011). Women's Empowerment Principles: Equality Means Business. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2011/10/women-s-empowerment-principles-equality-means-business.
[3] UN Women – Arab States. (n.d.). Addressing the economic fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and policy options for a gender-responsive recovery. https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/07/addressing-the-economic-fallout-of-covid-19-pathways-and-policy-options-for-a-gender-responsive-recovery

The pandemic led to widespread economic disruption, with many businesses experiencing closures, reduced operations or financial constraints.[4] This has affected private sector engagement, as companies face challenges in sustaining their operations and engaging in new initiatives. The decline in business activity has also resulted in reduced employment opportunities, hitting women particularly hard. Many women in Africa work in the informal sector, which was severely impacted by the pandemic. Informal workers often lack social protection and face precarious working conditions. With lockdowns, travel restrictions, and reduced economic activity, women in the informal sector faced job losses and reduced income, exacerbating existing gender inequalities.

The pandemic led to a surge in gender-based violence (GBV) globally, including in Africa. Lockdowns and movement restrictions confined many women to their homes with their abusers, while access to support services became limited. GBV undermines women's rights and hampers their ability to engage in economic activities and participate in society. COVID-19 strained healthcare systems across Africa, affecting women's access to essential healthcare services, including reproductive health. The diversion of resources and overwhelmed health systems led to women's limited access to prenatal care, contraceptives, and safe deliveries, increasing maternal health risks. Additionally, disruptions in routine immunisation programs put women and children at greater health risks.

School closures and remote learning challenges disproportionately impacted girls' education in Africa. Limited access to technology, along with household responsibilities, and early marriages contributed to increased dropout rates and reduced learning opportunities for girls. Educational setbacks hinder their future economic prospects and undermine gender equality efforts. The pandemic accelerated the need for digital solutions, but it also exposed the digital divide, particularly affecting women in Africa. Limited access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital skills hindered women's participation in remote work, online education, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) highlighted the need for an intentionally gendered response to avert the reversal of gains in women's income security and social protection brought about by the pandemic. Globally, COVID-19 impacted women's enterprises, which were disproportionately susceptible to economic shocks. The border closures and restricted mobility disrupted markets and supply chains, especially in sectors of tourism, hospitality, retail, agriculture, horticulture, textile and garment industries where women-owned enterprises dominate.

Women-owned businesses also tend to be more reliant on self-financing, thus increasing their risk of closure during extended periods which significantly affects their revenue. Discriminatory gender norms further inhibited the capacity of women farmers, entrepreneurs and employers to access financial institutions and financing. As COVID-19 response and recovery measures were rolled out to support businesses, these were largely inaccessible to women's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

[4] Wadhwa, P. B. D., & Wadhwa, P. B. D. (2023, August 26). 2020 Year in Review: The impact of COVID-19 in 12 charts. World Bank Blogs. https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/2020-year-review-impact-covid-19-12-charts

Despite the challenges, the pandemic also highlighted the critical role of women in leadership positions. Female leaders in Africa demonstrated effective crisis management and promoted gender-responsive policies during the pandemic. Their leadership serves as a positive example for the private sector and society at large. To mitigate these impacts, governments, civil society, and the private sector need to prioritise women's rights and gender equality in their response and recovery efforts. This includes targeted support for women-led businesses, social protection measures for female informal workers, investment in healthcare systems, addressing GBV, bridging the digital divide, and promoting women's leadership and participation in decision-making processes.

Africa faces persistent gender inequalities, with women facing limited access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making power. Private sector engagement offers a platform to address these disparities and promote gender equality. However, it is essential to recognise both the potential of the private sector in driving positive change and the existing gender gaps and biases within it.

Gender justice must lie at the heart of business and human rights. Women workers are often the worst paid and treated; women are often without land titles and dispossessed; and attacks on women who stand up to abusive labour practices are on the rise. Equally, women are an essential part of the solution: for instance, their struggle for decent work and a living wage facilitates many other key rights such as housing and the rights to health and education. Women are also organised – around pay discrimination, #MeToo in the workplace, and land rights, for instance.

Photo from Widows and Orphans Movement

Women are central to spurring economic growth in developing countries. Economically empowered women create healthier, more educated, and more productive societies, with advances in health, education and security not only serving to improve women's own status but also engendering a multiplier effect with benefits for whole societies. Women who earn and control incomes are particularly powerful agents for development.

Ghana, like other African countries, faces various development challenges, including poverty, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to healthcare and education, and environmental sustainability issues. However, with the increased call on the private sector to play a key role in development to achieve the SDGs, the government has embarked on initiatives that seek to engage the private sector in development.

The Ghana Investment Promotion Centre is the main agency responsible for promoting and facilitating private sector investment in Ghana. It offers various services, including investment advisory, promotion, and facilitation, to attract both local and foreign private sector investments.[5] However, there are concerns about how in efforts to attract foreign investments, the government tends to create an enabling business environment that favours foreign companies to the detriment of local businesses. Thus, local businesses are unable to compete with large, multinational companies (MNCs), due to the numerous incentives that governments give to foreign companies.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have been used as a modality to undertake infrastructure projects in sectors such as transportation, energy, and telecommunications. Notable examples include the expansion of the Tema Port and the construction of the Kwame Nkrumah Interchange in Accra through private sector participation.[6] Even though PPPs are seen as a financing mechanism for delivering the SDGs, the use of this modality is in contrast with the government's commitment to promote gender equality and the fulfilment of women's rights under Agenda 2030 and other international, regional and country-level frameworks.

It is essential that PPP-operated projects are assessed based on their impact on women's livelihoods and communities in general. For example, a road construction project in Ghana, which re-directed a highway through a town to the outskirts, though a good initiative, resulted in a lot of women and members of the community losing their source of livelihood, due to the redirection of the road. Alternative provisions were not made to ensure that sources of livelihoods of the people were secured. In general, PPPs are more expensive for governments, burdening governments with additional loans, and presenting more risks, especially with the lack of proper regulatory mechanisms over private sector activities. PPPs also create additional constraints that undermine the state's capacity to deliver gender-transformative public services and infrastructure and promote decent work for women.

The private sector will not automatically undertake activities that are aimed at achieving the SDGs, so it is dependent on other development actors, such as the

[4]Ghana Investment Promotion Centre. (2023, August 14). Home. https://www.gipc.gov.gh/
[5]Ghana Infrastructure Investment Fund. (2022, July 13). About GIIF. https://www.giif.gov.gh/

government and civil society, to monitor and ensure that the private sector operates by the development effectiveness principles. There is a need to forward social enterprises and micro, small and medium enterprises as alternatives to MNCs in these partnerships, given their role in contributing to job creation and development.

There have been initiatives by the Ghanaian government to involve these enterprises in development interventions. Initiatives such as the establishment of the Ghana Incentive-based Risk Sharing System for Agricultural Lending (GIRSAL) and the National Entrepreneurship and Innovation Plan (NEIP) have facilitated access to credit, business development support, and capacity building for entrepreneurs and SMEs. However, data on women-owned SMEs that have benefited from these initiatives is lacking.

Economic Empowerment Program

Overview

This case study focuses on the Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM), a women's rights organisation dedicated to advancing women's economic rights in the Upper East Region of Ghana. WOM has successfully leveraged its social enterprise, Atarrah Ghana, to empower women and promote sustainable development. The case study examines the strategies, outcomes, and challenges faced by WOM and Atarrah Ghana in their pursuit of private sector engagement.

About the project

Atarrah Ghana limited is a social enterprise of the Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM), a women's organisation dedicated to advancing women's economic rights in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The enterprise was created to empower widows economically, by developing and promoting the value chain of agricultural and non-timber products indigenous to northern Ghana. Women farmers and entrepreneurs cultivate and sell baobab oil and powder, neem oil, shea butter, handwoven textiles and baskets.

WOM and Atarrah provide employment opportunities and training programs on financial literacy, business management, marketing and product development. Through these initiatives, Atarrah Ghana aims to address the lack of income and social exclusion of widows, as well as contribute to environmental sustainability. The movement recognises that economic empowerment is crucial for gender equality and poverty reduction.

Modality	Capacity development
Instrument	Not applicable
Program Type	Capacity development
Duration	Attarah Ghana was established in 2013, initiatives are ongoing
Budget	Not applicable
Sector	Agriculture
Type of private sectors engaged	Company limited by shares

Private sector partners	Attarah Ghana Ltd.
Development Partner(s)	WOM has several donors that support their livelihood programs, such as Swisshand, St. Paul e V, KGL Foundation, The Church of Pentecost, Stichting Zaare, Steinhagen-Woerden-Burgerkomitees, Plan International, Action Aid Ghana. The organisation is also a member of several networks such as the Global Shea Alliance, Shea Network Ghana, Network for Women's Rights in Ghana, Oxfam, Women in Law and Development in Africa.
Role of partners	WOM and Atarrah Ghana's development partners support in various ways. Foundations and donors provide the necessary financing for the organisation to implement their activities. While other industry associations and government institutions work as collaborators in the livelihood programs of WOM. Partners from the academia and civil society provide the necessary technical advice and capacity development initiatives for the organisation and their partners.[7]
Monitoring	WOM publishes annual reports where the outcomes and impact of their programs are highlighted and detailed. The report also includes the breakdown of the funds they received and expenses during the period.
Results framework	No information available
Results	Atarrah Ghana has provided sustainable income opportunities to over 300 women in the region, which enabled them to support their families, send their children to school, and invest in their communities. An additional 400 women are provided with seasonal income from the sourcing of raw materials from December to April every year.
Evaluation	Despite the support of various development actors, the enterprise and organisation still face financial constraints in order to reach more women and to upscale its programs and operations. Atarrah Ghana encounters difficulties in accessing credit, largely due to the high interest rates. Due to the lack of laws recognising social enterprises in Ghana, Atarrah Ghana is registered as a company limited by shares, despite its character. Deep-rooted cultural norms and gender biases have posed challenges in promoting women's economic empowerment. WOM has to navigate societal resistance and promote behavioural change through awareness campaigns and education.

[7] Widows and Orphans Movement. (2015). 2015 Annual Report. https://www.paul-ev.eu/WOM-Berichte/WOM_15_Annual_Report._final.pdf.

Adherence to the Kampala Principles

Kampala Principle 1: Inclusive Country Ownership

Widows in Ghana face discrimination due to pre-existing notions and beliefs, which also impacts their socio-cultural and economic life. With this, WOM has undertaken livelihood programs to facilitate their economic empowerment, starting with jobs that women are already familiar with, such as basket and cloth weaving. The enterprise then expanded to agricultural activities, producing baobab and shea products, facilitating income generation for the widows.[8]

In addition to these programs on economic empowerment, the organisation also contributes to forwarding women's rights, focusing on the recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work, and women's access and control over land and other productive resources.

Kampala Principle 2: Results and Targeted Impact

The Widows and Orphans Movement recognises how widows are disproportionately impacted by violence, discrimination and poverty. Through its programs on human rights, education, economic empowerment and climate change, it aims to promote, uphold and protect the rights and dignity of widows and orphans, forwarding socio-cultural, economic and gender justice.

In their economic empowerment program, a majority of the beneficiaries are widows. These women were provided loans in order to grow their small enterprises.[9] Atarrah Ghana has provided sustainable income opportunities to over 300 women and seasonal income to 400 women in the region. These women are engaged to cultivate raw materials, like baobab seed and pods, and to produce shea butter. Others are involved in the sale and trade of these products. They are also able to diversify their livelihoods, in addition to animal rearing and processing of an indigenous spice called dawadawa, which provides them a stable income throughout the year.

Kampala Principle 3: Inclusive Partnership

By promoting economic empowerment, Atarrah has contributed to the overall development of communities in the Upper East Region. The increased income of women has led to improved access to healthcare, education and basic amenities. While widows are the main beneficiaries of WOM's programs, it also provides opportunities to other marginalised groups. As of 2022, the organisation has reached a total of 9,549 individuals, among which are 5,740 women, and a total of 984 children in 15 districts in the Upper East Region.

WOM and Atarrah Ghana work with a range of development actors coming from donor countries, foundations, civil society, the private sector and the academia. The assistance provided to the programs varies from partner to partner, which includes financial resources, technical assistance and capacity development. The organisation's multi-stakeholder partnerships enable them to reach more women beneficiaries and to promote their advocacy further.

[8]Durrani, S. (2021). Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM). https://www.savannahfruits.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SFC_WOM_Report_v2.pdf.
[9]Widows and Orphans Movement. (2019). 2022 Annual Report. https://womgh.org/download/14535/?tmstv=1682772949.

Kampala Principle 4: Transparency and Accountability

Atarrah Ghana only purchases raw materials from widow groups, in order to support their livelihoods. They also encourage other businesses to deal directly with women-led enterprises for baobab and shea products, in order to provide them profit and lessen social stigma in interacting with widows.[10] Furthermore, the organisation produces annual reports that detail the impacts and outcomes of its initiatives. These also have detailed financial reports, of how they utilised the funding from their donors and partners.

Kampala Principle 5: Recognising, sharing and mitigating risks for all partners

As the source of income of these women is dependent on their natural environment, they recognise that they also have to contribute to environmental sustainability. With the baobab and shea trees being indigenous to northern Ghana, the women have the responsibility to foster climate-resilient sustainable agricultural practices. Furthermore, equipping women with entrepreneurial and vocational skills has enabled them to secure better employment opportunities, start their own businesses, and contribute to the local economy.

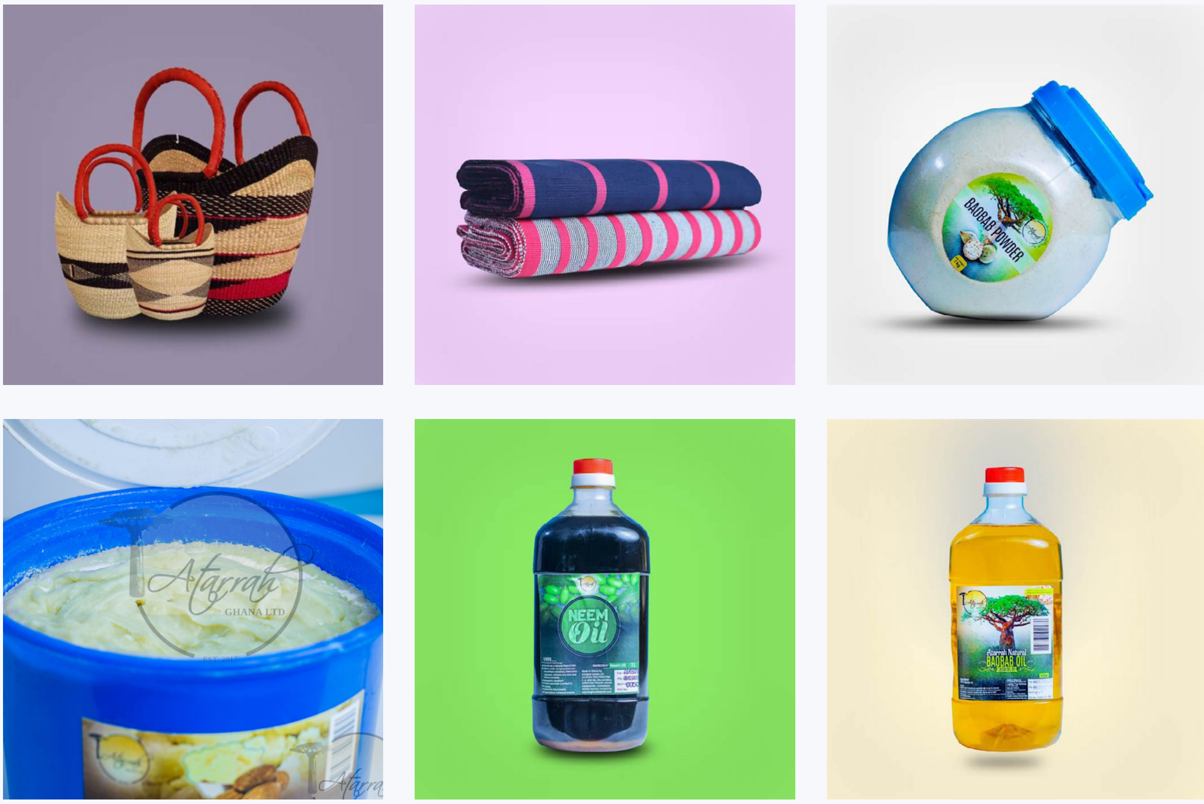

Figure 1. Products of Attarah Ghana, produced by widows in the Upper East Region.
Source: www.womgh.org/shop

[10]Durrani, S. (2021). Widows and Orphans Movement (WOM). https://www.savannahfruits.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SFC_WOM_Report_v2.pdf.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the government of Ghana has increasingly promoted public-private partnerships with multinational corporations to address development challenges and promote women's rights, it can be seen in the case of Atarrah Ghana and the Widows and Orphans Movement that social enterprises are more viable partners for development cooperation, given their impact on the communities and sectors they serve. Despite the positive outcomes demonstrated by social enterprises in contributing to sustainable development, there is a lack of support being given to these entities.

With these, the following recommendations are to be considered in order to promote the role of social enterprises and uphold women's rights in private sector engagement for development cooperation:

- **For all private sector entities to ensure that their business activities and development interventions adhere to the Kampala Principles and pursue women's rights and development.**
- **For the government to recognise the potential of social enterprises as private sector partners by passing policies and programs that promote their role in development. With the lack of laws that recognise social enterprises, Atarrah Ghana cannot be categorised as such and is limited in its functions to contribute to the country's development.**
- **Public finance, government support and technical assistance must be made available to gender-sensitive social enterprises and micro, small, and medium enterprises that contribute to the creation of livelihoods and domestic development. Grants and credit lines remain inaccessible to MSMEs and social enterprises, due to the requirements and scale of projects promoted by governments.**
- **For development actors to develop multi-stakeholder platforms that enable the participation of governments, multilateral institutions, private sector partners, and civil society to promote the role of social enterprises as transformational partners of the marginalised to forward inclusive, equitable and sustainable economies that involve women.**