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STEREOTYPES AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN FUNDING SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS FOCUSED ON WOMEN¹

ESTEREÓTIPOS E DISCRIMINAÇÃO DE GÊNERO NO FINANCIAMENTO DE ORGANIZAÇÕES SOCIAIS VOLTADAS PARA AS MULHERES

Vânia Maria Jorge Nassif²

Alice Salvo Sosnowski³

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the gender stereotypes and discrimination faced by social organizations focused on female entrepreneurship, using the Rede Mulher Empreendedora Institute (IRME) as a case study. It examines the obstacles the organization encounters in empowering women in situations of economic vulnerability and supporting income generation. Through a methodology that combines analysis of IRME's internal data, external studies, and interviews with its leaders, the study demonstrates how the organization, by developing innovative methodologies and strategies to overcome fundraising challenges, proves that investing in women's potential not only drives economic development but also generates projects with significant social impact. The study highlights the gender inequalities present in the funding ecosystem for social organizations, revealing the structural challenges that hinder the promotion of women's empowerment and emphasizing the urgent need to overcome gender stereotypes that limit access to resources for initiatives aimed at women's socioeconomic development.

Keywords: social organization, funding, social impact, gender inequality, stereotypes, women entrepreneurs.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objetivo apresentar uma análise dos estereótipos e discriminação de gênero enfrentados por organizações sociais focadas no

¹ Recebido em 29/07/2025. Aprovado em 06/08/2025. DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17062417

² Universidade Nove de Julho. vania.nassif@gmail.com

³ IED São Paulo. alicesalvo@gmail.com



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empreendedorismo feminino, tendo como estudo de caso o Instituto Rede Mulher Empreendedora (IRME) e os obstáculos que enfrenta para capacitar mulheres em situação de vulnerabilidade econômica e apoiar a geração de renda. Por meio de uma metodologia que combina análise de dados internos do IRME, estudos externos e entrevistas com suas líderes, o trabalho demonstra como a organização, ao desenvolver metodologias e estratégias inovadoras para superar as dificuldades na captação de recursos, comprova que investir no potencial feminino não apenas impulsiona o desenvolvimento econômico, mas também gera projetos de significativo impacto social. O estudo evidencia as desigualdades de gênero presentes no ecossistema de financiamento de organizações sociais, revelando os desafios estruturais que dificultam a promoção do empoderamento feminino e destacando a necessidade urgente de superar os estereótipos de gênero que limitam o acesso a recursos para iniciativas voltadas ao desenvolvimento socioeconômico das mulheres.

Palavras-Chave: organização social, financiamento, impacto social, desigualdade de gênero, estereótipos, mulheres empreendedoras.

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this article is to critically reflect on gender stereotypes and discrimination in funding social organizations whose work focuses on female audiences. The object of analysis will be the Women Entrepreneur Network Institute (Instituto Rede Mulher Empreendedora - IRME), a non-profit civil society organization created in 2017 in São Paulo, Brazil, which focuses on female employability and income generation for women entrepreneurs, especially those in situations of social vulnerability. Recognizing the urgency of addressing social problems and global inequalities, IRME aligns its purpose with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically those related to Gender Equality (SDG 5), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10), and Partnerships and Means of Implementation (SDG 17).

The Institute is also responsible for the most important annual research on female entrepreneurship in Brazil. IRME works in partnership with organizations such as UN Women, government institutions that support women's



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causes, and more than 280 local NGOs, in addition to international foundations such as Google.org, Mapfre Foundation, and Visa Foundation. The most recent data from the Annual Activities Report shows that IRME raised more than eight million reais in 2024, with 5 million from projects developed with large companies, 217 thousand reais from individual donations, and just over 162 thousand reais from corporate donations.

Funding is sought nationally and internationally with organizations interested in developing joint social projects but also comes from profits donated by companies at specific times, such as Women's/Mother's/Female Entrepreneurship Month. To reach individuals, IRME uses collaborative donation platforms. With the resources raised, IRME uses innovative methodologies in its work, developing socio-emotional competencies (soft skills) and technical skills (hard skills) focused on entrepreneurial training and employability for women.

Although there is growing recognition of female entrepreneurship as a social solution in the context of economic inequality (NASSIF et al. 2025), it is still necessary to understand why it does not attract donations and funding with the same intensity. Through interviews with the founder and current CEO of IRME, as well as with the director of programs and fundraising, and through documentary analysis, this article offers a critical analysis of third sector organization funding and suggests alternatives to improve this situation.

RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The search for solutions and promotion of positive changes are the main goals of social organizations, which address social, cultural, environmental, and community needs. Focusing on humanitarian, educational, health, environmental, and other causes, these entities, often non-profit, play a vital role in promoting social welfare and resolving community issues (STEPHAN et al., 2016).



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Operating in entrepreneurial ecosystems, social organizations drive innovation and growth. These interconnected systems include favorable culture, human capital development, exploration of new markets, institutional support, infrastructure, and financing (BRUSH et al., 2019). Acting interdependently, actors and institutions exert mutual influence, with the concept of ecosystems being an expression of growing interest in promoting entrepreneurship through programs and policies (ACS et al., 2017).

An important discussion is the relationship between stereotype, discrimination, and funding. According to Brush et al. (2019), gender stereotypes can influence the perception of credibility and competence of women entrepreneurs and affect their chances of obtaining funding for their ventures. It is a fact that gender discrimination in funding is one of the difficulties faced by female entrepreneurs in gaining space and resources in a masculinized context, where culture is strongly focused on patriarchy. Discriminatory practices limit women's access to financial resources, such as loans and investments, harming their opportunities for growth and business success (BRUSH et al., 2009).

Examples of gender discrimination in funding include higher interest rates for women entrepreneurs compared to men, stricter requirements for proving financial capacity, and lower availability of investment capital. These financial barriers hinder the development and expansion of women-led businesses, perpetuating gender inequality in entrepreneurship (COLEMAN, 2019).

Furthermore, it is important to discuss the advances and challenges faced by women leading social organizations (CORRÊA et al., 2024). Women have played a fundamental role in leading social organizations, seeking solutions to social issues and promoting positive changes. However, they still face obstacles, such as lack of access to financial resources and underrepresentation in leadership positions, which limits their impact and influence (DÍAZ-GARCÍA et al., 2016).



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It is important to emphasize that overcoming the challenges faced by women regarding funding is not only a matter of social justice, but also of economic benefit. Studies have shown that gender equality in entrepreneurship can boost economic growth, innovation, and job creation (COLEMAN, 2019). Therefore, investing in policies and programs that promote gender equality in access to financial resources is an intelligent and beneficial strategy for society as a whole.

Beyond these achievements, it is important to understand the barriers that women's businesses face, reflect on and propose solutions for how to address them so that the entrepreneurial ecosystem can leverage economic power, especially of women, in order to promote growth and achieve development goals (AHMAD & MUHAMMAD ARIF, 2015).

Women face significant challenges in obtaining credit and funding for their ventures due to entrenched gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices. These barriers, in general and more specifically financial ones, limit their opportunities for growth and business success, perpetuating gender inequality in entrepreneurship.

In a context where social organizations focused on female audiences seek funding, overcoming strategies become crucial. The creation of specific investment funds for women entrepreneurs, for example, is an approach that has been used to address discriminatory funding challenges (BRUSH et al., 2019). Additionally, awareness and education campaigns about the importance of gender equality in entrepreneurship can help change practices and attitudes (DÍAZ-GARCÍA et al., 2016).

In social entrepreneurship, the gender gap is reduced, since the values defended by social enterprises have strong identification with women due to roles and stereotypes. Women play a crucial role in these enterprises, filling gaps left by public institutions unable to address all social challenges (NICOLÁS & RUBIO,



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2016; ACS et al., 2017). However, obtaining adequate funding, especially for women entrepreneurs, is often difficult (AHMAD & MUHAMMAD ARIF, 2015).

Given this complex dynamic of entrepreneurial ecosystems and social organizations, it is essential to understand how such factors interact with the funding barriers faced by organizations that seek to empower women entrepreneurs. This issue is aggravated by the impact of entrenched gender stereotypes and perception on access to credit and resources needed to empower women entrepreneurs. Understanding stereotypes and gender identification, as defended by Koenig and Eagly (2014), reveals that such persistent beliefs and practices can create barriers, making it difficult to obtain the necessary funding for social organizations to help women overcome these obstacles and thrive in entrepreneurship.

Thus, social organizations face a dual challenge: not only confronting funding barriers but also combating the stereotypes and discrimination that directly involve women entrepreneurs who seek support and credit for their initiatives. Stereotypes can shape donors' and funders' expectations regarding the potential success of social organizations focused on female audiences.

In sociological terms, gender is defined as a social construction that distributes power through relationships in social networks in such a way that it elevates the masculine and subordinates the feminine (MUSTAFA & TREATOR, 2022). Thus, entrepreneurship research uses the gender lens as a variable to examine differences between women and men entrepreneurs, to explore how gender influences entrepreneurship.

An example of this discrimination is the difficulty experienced by women entrepreneurs when requesting bank loans to access capital. These restrictive actions reflect one of the main impediments for women who wish to develop their businesses (AHMAD & MUHAMMAD ARIF, 2015; BARDASI et al., 2011; LINDVERT et al., 2015). The influence of gender in obtaining venture capital



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funding demonstrates how entrepreneurs signal the viability of their ventures and how this is interpreted by investors. Gender plays a role not only in the differences between masculine and feminine, but also in the interaction between both and investors (ALSOS & LJUNGGREN, 2017).

Women, as a rule, are discriminated against when trying to access necessary resources for their businesses, experiencing different challenges, especially those who started their businesses out of survival necessity (LIMA et al., 2024), and research data from Guzman and Kacperczyk (2019) reveals that women-led ventures are 63% less likely than those led by men to obtain venture capital funding.

On the other hand, female entrepreneurship is stereotyped with characteristics incompatible with those observed in female entrepreneurs who have achieved success in their business activities. This means that sometimes women entrepreneurs receive less credit than men due to unfair prejudices such as the belief that women are not qualified to manage money (RUBIO-BAÑÓN & ESTEBAN-LLORET, 2016).

Funders and investors cannot observe a person's entrepreneurial capacity, except to predict a different probability of success, thus relating funds based on indicators. However, when analyzing grants based on ethnicity and gender, it can cause adverse selection problems, making poor choices and missing opportunities to invest in potentially profitable businesses (LINDVERT et al., 2015).

The consequences and impacts of gender discrimination in funding are therefore significant. Beyond limiting economic growth and innovation, the exclusion of women from access to financial resources perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces harmful stereotypes. This results in a less just and equitable society, where women's potential is underutilized (COLEMAN, 2019),



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and they continue to be poorly served by financial institutions, hindering the expansion of their businesses (AHMAD & MUHAMMAD ARIF, 2015).

To combat stereotypes and gender discrimination in access to resources, comprehensive initiatives are necessary, such as policies and programs that promote gender equality in entrepreneurship, the creation of specific investment funds for women entrepreneurs (BRUSH et al., 2019), and awareness and education campaigns to change perceptions and attitudes (DÍAZ-GARCÍA et al., 2016).

Another effective strategy is strengthening support networks and mentoring for women entrepreneurs. The lack of access to contact networks and mentoring can be a significant obstacle for women seeking funding. Establishing programs that connect women entrepreneurs to experienced mentors and a support network can provide guidance, knowledge, and networking opportunities, increasing their chances of success in obtaining financial resources (BRUSH et al., 2019).

However, there are ongoing efforts to combat this discrimination and promote gender equality in access to financial resources. Initiatives such as the creation of specific investment funds for women entrepreneurs, awareness and education campaigns, the strengthening of support networks and mentoring have been proposed as effective strategies to overcome these obstacles, such as those promoted by IRME.

METHODOLOGY: IRME'S WORKING CONTEXT

The Women Entrepreneur Network (Rede Mulher Empreendedora - RME) was born in 2010 during the "10,000 Women Program" promoted by the American investment bank Goldman Sachs Foundation and offered in São Paulo by Fundação Getúlio Vargas. The founder, Ana Fontes, participated in the program and realized that the concerns, doubts, and difficulties she faced in



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entrepreneurship were shared by other women, even those who were not part of the program.

With this perception, in 2017, Ana Fontes decided to expand the objectives and founded the Women Entrepreneur Network Institute (Instituto Rede Mulher Empreendedora - IRME). It is a non-profit association dedicated to helping women in social vulnerability achieve economic autonomy. This is accomplished through the development of socio-emotional skills, education for income generation, and support for women-led businesses.

IRME operates on various fronts, including training, mentoring, business connections, financial resources, events, research, and support for public policies. Its methodologies are tested, evaluated, and adapted in projects that have already benefited more than 400,000 women by 2021, according to the annual report.

The Institute is also committed to addressing social problems and global inequalities, aligning its purpose with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on Gender Equality, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Reduced Inequalities, encouraging women entrepreneurs in creating and developing new businesses.

To expand its reach and impact, IRME establishes partnerships with organizations such as UN Women, government institutions supporting women's causes, more than 280 local NGOs, and international foundations such as Google.org, Mapfre Foundation, and Visa Foundation. Through these collaborations, the Institute seeks to strengthen the fight for gender equality and women's economic inclusion.

THE PROFILE OF WOMEN SERVED BY IRME

The 2024 Report of the Women Entrepreneur Network Institute (IRME) shows that the current profile of women entrepreneurs served is predominantly

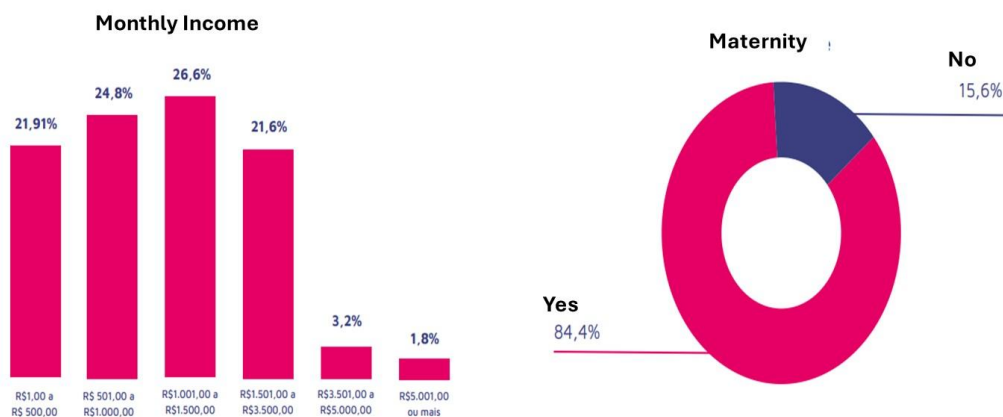


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Black (77%), with the group that self-declared as mixed-race standing out. Regarding age, the ranges from 25 to 33 years and 34 to 42 years predominated, together representing 66% of the women. Approximately 60% completed high school, more than 84% are mothers, and 73% are responsible for household income, which in turn is concentrated at low levels, with just over 73% not exceeding R\$ 1,500.00, equivalent to US\$ 264.00, as can be seen in Figure 1. The institute's focus is specifically on this population that finds itself in social vulnerability.

Figure 1 - Who they are: General profile of the beneficiaries



Source: IRME Annual Activity Report (2024).

RESULTS: OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED IN FUNDRAISING

Just like women in the job market, IRME also faces obstacles related to gender stereotypes and discrimination. To understand what the obstacles in fundraising are, interviews were conducted with IRME's two managers: the founder and current CEO, Ana Fontes, and the director of programs and fundraising, Célia Kano.

Ana Fontes worked for almost 20 years in the corporate world, and also suffered discrimination for being a woman, from the Northeast, and of Black origin. In 2010, she left a stable job at a large multinational automotive industry



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company and founded the Women Entrepreneur Network, a social business focused on supporting women entrepreneurs. Seven years later, she created the Women Entrepreneur Network Institute (IRME), a non-profit association focused on supporting women in social vulnerability.

Célia Kano holds a degree in Mechatronic Engineering and a master's degree from the Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo - USP. She worked with business management in various sectors such as automotive, electrical, infrastructure, health, retail, and pharmaceutical. Post-graduate in Social Innovation Management from Amani Institute, Célia is pursuing a doctorate on business models with social impact in Production Engineering at the Polytechnic School of USP.

Together, IRME's leaders answered a series of questions explaining how they deal with obstacles involving the difficulty of obtaining resources to finance the institute's work.

The questions that were part of the interview script were based on the literature (AHMAD & MUHAMMAD ARIF, 2015, KOENIG & EAGLY 2014, ALSOS & LJUNGGREN, 2017, GUZMAN & KACPERCZYK, 2019, COLEMAN, 2018, and BRUSH et al., 2018).

Inequalities at various levels

There are various obstacles in fundraising for social organizations in Brazil. The country is the 7th most unequal on the planet, where income concentration is very strong and those most affected by inequalities are women and Black people.

Historically, women's businesses are those with the least opportunity to access human, social, and financial capital in Brazil. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2023 (GEM), the business volume of women and men is almost the same; however, they have different sizes - and investments. This is



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due to various social issues, such as women's later access to and valuation in formal education, with lower rates of women in business courses such as administration and engineering.

Most investors are men, and it is difficult to escape gender biases in networking, negotiation, and empathy with social causes. Finally, decision-making is influenced and privileges men. There is a social and historical behavior where investing in women is seen as social philanthropy and not as a real market investment. Ana Fontes emphasizes the discrimination she herself faced when raising investment for women: "several times, I suffered questioning about the importance of income generation work for women as an important tool for social change."

For the interviewees, the social and philanthropic financing ecosystem is still embryonic in Brazil and is also unequal. Célia Kano explains that this inequality in access to funding exists from small local organizations that have a strong female presence to large organizations, which is quite a masculinized territory, because "Brazilian social organizations that are led by men have more visibility and, as a consequence, end up securing more resources and spaces."

The managers also report that funding institutions more connected to the financial sector (banks and investments) prefer to focus on more generalist causes such as education, poverty reduction, and the Amazon, and consider women's issues as niche and crosscutting within generalist causes. Célia Kano points out that investors in this financial sector transfer their market and productivity vision to the social and philanthropic world: they have a profitability perspective, with lower investment and higher gain, and therefore prioritize larger businesses that are already scaling. This ends up excluding businesses that are smaller but promising. Additionally, Célia Kano reinforces that there is a lack of knowledge among funders from all sectors about women's obstacles and opportunities with income generation, who do not understand how investment in



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this cross-cutting theme can generate tangible gain for generalist causes as a whole. Therefore, Célia Kano emphasizes that social organizations should make their impact actions explicit and implement management oriented toward monitoring and disseminating quantitative impact metrics with investors.

Fundraising methods

IRME's fundraising process happens both actively and passively. The institute raises donations from individuals and legal entities, which are companies formally established in the country. With individuals, these are generally micro-donations from people who identify with the NGO's social mission. IRME participates in collaborative donation platforms and people who identify with women's causes donate spontaneously.

Legal entities are normally large private companies and national and international foundations. Usually, companies and foundations approach the IRME Institute interested in developing social projects together. Profit donations from company sales also occur at specific moments (such as during women's/mothers'/female entrepreneurship month). In these cases, the fundraising team talks, designs the project, prices it, negotiates, and closes the donation receipt.

Célia Kano comments that one of the obstacles is negotiation with private companies and foundations connected to private companies that often come up with ideas for actions with women that do not connect with IRME's impact thesis and require many marketing and branding counterparts.

There is a huge negotiation lead time until reaching a project design that makes sense for all three sides. First, we have to look at the population in vulnerability, but also support the social journey of the companies that donate and ensure the financial sustainability of our social organization. [Célia Kano - Director]



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In active prospecting, IRME searches for and identifies companies, foundations, and open calls for proposals and presents projects and proposals. The managers explain, however, that calls for proposals are burdensome with bureaucratic application forms and many stages and long deadlines, usually with little funding involved. Even so, IRME continuously submits projects to various calls for proposals, as they can involve awards and certificates that open doors to networking and international fundraising.

There are specific obstacles in fundraising prospecting done through calls for proposals. Most national calls for proposals do not have financial resources and only offer award recognition and networking. In international ones, there is a lack of professionals internally in Brazilian NGOs who have basic competence for fundraising and negotiation, such as lack of English proficiency. The language barrier directly affects relationships for international fundraising [Ana Fontes – founder].

Beyond the reported obstacles, there are tax issues that serve as impediments to fundraising. IRME has had exemption from some taxes since 2022. However, this exemption is not common for most NGOs, which must pay taxes on national donations.

For funders with a market and productivity vision (greater impact with less capital), having to also explain that part of the resource will not be used by the institute for impact scale is not easy. Brazilian NGOs fundraise from the same funders and have an advantage in impact volume and in negotiation with funders, for those who have tax exemptions. [Célia Kano – Director]

Resource management and transparency

The obstacles also extend to managing received resources. The latest data from its 2021 Annual Activities Report shows that IRME raised more than 7 million reais in legal entity donations, equivalent to \$1,400,000, while individual donations raised just over 24 thousand reais in the year, equivalent to \$4,800.

With these resources, IRME creates projects and initiatives such as Female Power, She Secures, Their Jobs, They Prosper, and Female Empowerment for Income Generation, in addition to working on information



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gathering for the most important annual research on female entrepreneurship in Brazil and developing an ecosystem mapping with a survey of institutions and companies that support the sector.

Through these actions, and other initiatives, IRME consolidates itself as one of the country's main social organizations serving mothers, daughters, professionals, entrepreneurs, many victims of unemployment, hunger, domestic violence, and discrimination.

To carry out this work, IRME works with local NGOs that act as territorial partners who have recognition in communities and provide face-to-face service to the local population. For this, IRME dedicates itself to creating partnerships that develop local NGOs through financial resource transfers or provision of equipment such as computers or room renovations for training. A differential of IRME in these partnerships is developing partner NGOs, not only with the replication of IRME's educational methodology. As Ana Fontes explains:

Our objective is not to undermine local NGOs, but rather to enhance their work as our partners. This generates a fairer, long-term relationship and a more robust and responsive partner network for national work, while also facilitating access to funding.

On the other hand, Célia Kano explains that this partnership format that focuses on the development and investment of local NGOs creates an additional obstacle in fundraising:

It is not easy to convince funders that additional financial resources are necessary for investment in local partner NGOs. Defending the construction of a network of partners in which IRME financially invests in local NGOs is innovative, as other large social organizations similar to IRME create simplified social franchise models without financial investment. Some may only involve sharing educational methodologies and brand promotion as project partners. For funders, these other large social organizations negatively influence those who provide resources and reinforce the market and productivity vision. In the long term, we see that these partnerships are not sustainable, as they do not generate a long-term relationship and legacy for local NGOs. [Célia Kano – director]



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In addition to investments for projects involving training, Ana Fontes explains that IRME advocates that projects should not only focus on training through content transmission, but also projects that provide financial resources:

We have strongly defended that projects cannot only have training/content, but we must provide financial resources (study scholarships, food assistance, financial prizes, and others) so that especially women in vulnerability can prioritize studying and can also invest in their businesses. [Ana Fontes – founder].

Ana Fontes' statement emphasizes that projects should not be limited to offering training and content, but should include the provision of concrete financial resources, such as study scholarships, food assistance, and financial prizes. This is crucial, especially for women in situations of vulnerability, allowing them to prioritize studies and also invest in their businesses. In this way, IRME recognizes the need for comprehensive approaches that address the multiple dimensions of inequalities faced by these women. Therefore, the perspective encompasses the financial aspect as an effective way to empower and contribute to the socioeconomic progress of the entrepreneurs in question:

Obtaining financial resources in cash is a drama in fundraising, because we need to convince partners to give money for this. For real impact, we need resources to transfer to local NGOs and to transfer to women to invest in their businesses. [Ana Fontes – founder].

Célia Kano adds a perspective highlighting the challenge of convincing partners to invest in this type of financial support. She points out that the need for resources for larger and more comprehensive projects can result in higher and more complex budgets with partners. This difficulty illustrates the barrier faced by social organizations seeking funding for projects that go beyond training. This is a differential of IRME's operating model, such as the partnership model format with local NGOs and this incentive to provide financial resources, which generate real impact but make fundraising difficult.

IRME also works in partnership with government institutions that expand the scale of impact through the creation of public policies and articulation of local



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partnerships with local reach at the national level. These local public partnerships can involve promotion, mobilization, and provision of space for training. Partnership with government institutions also reinforces IRME's reputation and credibility for funding.

The Institute is committed to transparency and compliance. On the official website (<https://institutorme.org.br/transparencia/>) anyone can access annual and audit reports with external bodies. The Institute also has in its governance an advisory council and an active fiscal council that meets periodically for strategic decision-making.

IRME also conducts annual public accountability through IRME's annual activities report. Finally, LAB IRME is dedicated to monitoring, evaluating, and disseminating impact metrics of programs conducted and also through annual data studies, the annual research on women's obstacles in income generation. These strategies help generate numbers, data, and concrete facts about the work and facilitate IRME's positioning.

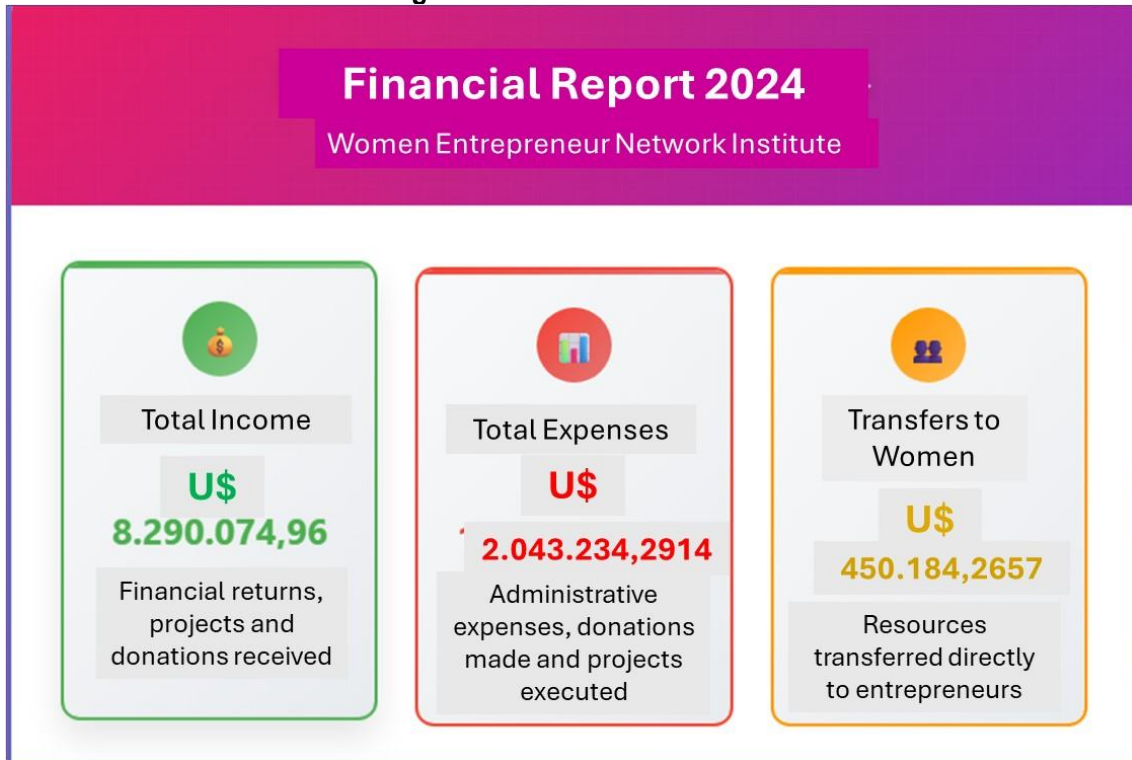
This data reveals that the Institute executed R\$ 11,110,699.43 in expenditure against R\$ 8,290,074.96 in income, resulting in a deficit of R\$ 2,820,624.47, which reflects the application of resources raised in previous years for multi-year projects. It is noteworthy that R\$ 2,488,012.00 (30% of income) was transferred directly to women entrepreneurs, demonstrating effective fulfillment of the institutional mission of supporting female entrepreneurship in situations of social vulnerability. Administrative expenses of R\$ 3,320,395.54 represent 40% of income, remaining within adequate parameters for third sector organizations that execute structural projects, evidencing focus on final execution and direct social impact with the target audience.



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Figure 2 Financial Resources



Source: IRME (2024).

Achievements accomplished

The obstacles experienced by IRME are numerous and complex. Having worked in the sector for 15 years, Ana Fontes comments that it is difficult to maintain focus and not succumb to other demands that are many in the field of inequalities in Brazil. She explains that it is necessary to act firmly in governance, and in monitoring processes and people. For her, maintaining a motivated and engaged team in such an important cause in this scenario is one of her main challenges as a leader.

Even so, through its projects, IRME has achieved various advances in the cause of women's economic and financial autonomy. Some strategies such as training, mentoring, events, and other actions with tested and evaluated developed methodologies, the institute has already reached more than 400,000

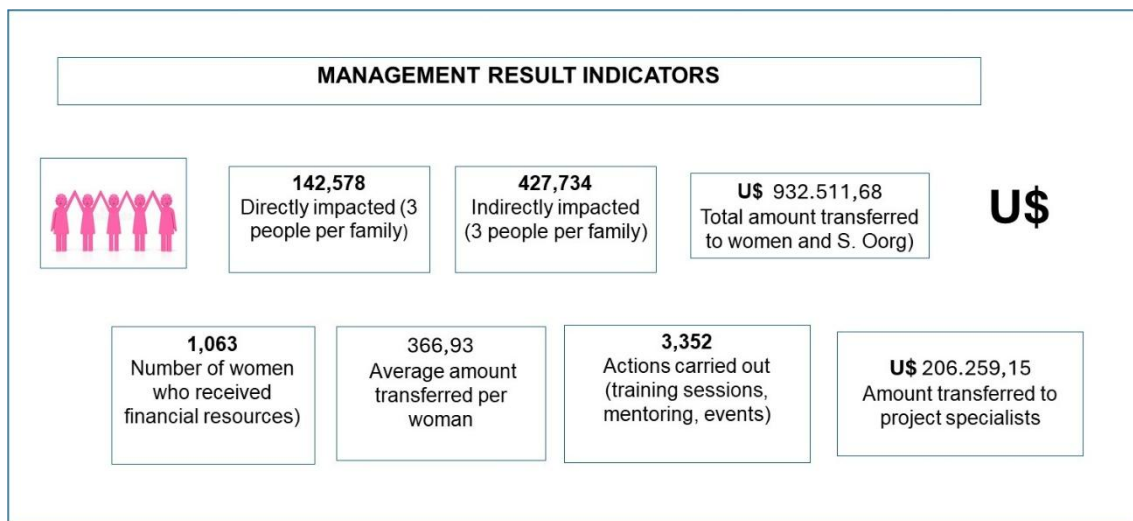


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women, directly and indirectly, in all regions of Brazil, with encouraging numbers: 88% approval from women after participating in the programs, increasing business income by 63%, and 47% opening new businesses.

Figure 3- IRME's achievements



Source: RME Annual Activity Report (2024).

IRME generates annual research for public policy discussion such as access to capital, intersectional analyses, pandemic impacts, and gender perspectives. The largest research on female entrepreneurship in the country is published every year by the institute on the official website (<https://institutorme.org.br/lab-irme/>), with wide dissemination in Brazilian media.

Additionally, the institute updates semiannually the mapping of the Support Ecosystem for Brazilian Women, whose objective is to gather and give recognition and visibility to the various initiatives directed toward training, education, and support for women, enabling access to rights and opportunities for self-development.

The mapping has selection criteria to indicate which are the main initiatives, including: institutions or programs 100% focused on supporting women, with national-level operation and in operation at the time of this research



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update, also having some active communication channel through website or social media. The initiatives can be microenterprises and private companies, internal groups and collectives of institutions and NGOs.

The 2023 mapping presents 200 initiatives, some of them local NGOs that work in partnership with IRME on projects, which are subdivided into 21 categories, including: female entrepreneurship, leadership, Black women, women in politics, women 50+, refugee women, immigrant women, women in agribusiness, corporate women, and combating violence and harassment against women. In recognition of its actions, IRME received important awards, such as:

Figure 4 – AWARDS Received

AWARDS	RECOGNITION
100 Best NGOs in Brazil	Promoted by Instituto Doar and Ambev VOA, recognizing the NGOs in Brazil that stand out annually for their excellence in management, governance, financial sustainability, and transparency.
Social Entrepreneurship of the Year in Response to Covid-19	Winner in the Mitigation category, by Folha de São Paulo.
Betinho Award, from São Paulo City Council	Recognizes non-profit institutions that carry out projects in the capital of São Paulo to combat hunger, exclusion, violence, and misery.
Municipal Seal of Human Rights and Diversity, from São Paulo City Hall	Recognizes good diversity management practices and promotion of human rights in companies, public agencies, and third sector organizations.
Visionaris - UBS Challenge, financial institution present in the world's main financial centers	Recognizes and awards high social impact initiatives in compliance with one or more of the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations.
1st place in the non-governmental organizations category	4th edition of the Judge Viviane Vieira do Amaral award, promoted by the National Council of Justice (CNJ)

Source: IRME (2023, 2024)

Despite the recognition attributed to IRME, this fundraising scenario still reveals obstacles that social organizations encounter in reducing gender inequality in the investment field. The social and philanthropic financing ecosystem in Brazil is still new and unequal, with organizations led by men having



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more visibility and resources. Additionally, financial institutions demand generalist causes, relegating women's issues to a niche. Funders often transfer a market mentality to the social sector, excluding smaller but promising businesses.

Resource mobilization happens both actively and passively, involving donations from both individuals and legal entities, with specific obstacles in each approach. Partnership with local NGOs, although necessary, requires convincing funders of the need for additional investment. Partnerships with government institutions expand the scale of impact but provide strategies to ensure the development of local NGOs. Transparency and compliance are priorities to provide legitimacy in social investments.

The search for funding to support women entrepreneurs, according to the interviewees' reports, faces a series of complex barriers, including entrenched gender inequalities, lack of recognition for women's causes, and obstacles in fundraising and resource management. Despite this, IRME demonstrates a remarkable commitment to overcoming these obstacles and positively impacting the lives of women in social vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to critically reflect on gender stereotypes and discrimination in funding social organizations whose final work focuses on female audiences. The Women Entrepreneur Network Institute (IRME) was the object of this study, as it is considered one of the main Brazilian institutions supporting income generation for women.

This study offers significant theoretical contributions by critically analyzing the intersection between gender stereotypes and funding barriers in the third sector, demonstrating how social organizations face a dual challenge - combating not only the discrimination that directly affects their beneficiaries, but



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also overcoming prejudices that limit their own access to resources. The work expands understanding of how sociological gender factors influence entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in the context of organizations focused on female empowerment.

From a practical standpoint, IRME's analyses prove that female entrepreneurs reinvest and improve not only their businesses and families, but also support other women and communities, generating a multiplier cycle of socioeconomic development. Even though women's work is an evident solution in the context of economic inequality, it is clear that organizations like IRME still face significant obstacles to achieving representation of transformative initiatives.

The implications for public policies reveal that supporting organizations focused on female empowerment means improving the economic and social situation of an entire nation. More than a specific cause, women's initiatives compose a robust and promising ecosystem that transcends gender stereotypes and impacts the entire Brazilian population, demanding more inclusive financing policies that are conscious of gender specificities.

By highlighting IRME's trajectory, this study demonstrates the systemic complexity of raising resources and sustaining transformative initiatives in the third sector. On the other hand, it demonstrates how its actions in promoting gender equity and economic empowerment of women in situations of vulnerability not only individually impact the beneficiaries served, but also reverberate toward a more inclusive, egalitarian, and prosperous society, offering a replicable model for other social organizations and contributing to the advancement of knowledge about funding social organizations with a gender focus.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors thank the Women Entrepreneur Network Institute - IRME, the founder of RME, Ana Fontes, and the director of programs and fundraising



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Célia Kano, who authorized the mention of their names and provided organizational data.



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