

THE OTHER HALF

Looking at interesting initiatives for fairer gender opportunities

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Led by HER: Turning vulnerability into leadership

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Photo credit: www.huffingtonpost.com

Projects targeting women entrepreneurs are rare and ones as inspiring as Chiara Condi's Led By HER even more. Led by HER specialises in training and education for women who have suffered from violence and/or exploitation and supports them with the launching and growing of their own business projects. I contacted Chiara to know more about the Led by HER and the ideas and lessons she shared with me are very inspiring to anyone interested in learning more about women leaders and entrepreneurs.

An initial gap to be filled

So how did the story start? Listening to Chiara tell the story of the first steps she took towards this project, it is a story of search for meaning, an obvious gap to be filled in the market and successful trials and errors. Indeed, when Chiara moved from London to Paris after her Master at LSE and a few years of work on gender at the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and as she was forced into convalescence, she looked for volunteering work in her field but found most doors shut. Still, through the domestic violence organisations Chiara contacted, she rapidly noticed a pattern: women who had been victims of violence were also very keen in learning more about financial autonomy. Some even had thought of projects or business ideas they could pursue but they needed more support to make them happen.

From there, the target group and the need states were clearly identified. The statistics on the ground in Paris made it only easier to pitch the idea. In fact, Led By HER's annual report states that in France, 10% have been victims of violence. Also, in a context where entrepreneurship is very much valued to boost economic growth, only 3% of women aged 18-64 are entrepreneurs while 30% of French entrepreneurs are women. The women interested in the initiative also came from very diverse socio-economic background and origins, reflecting the complexity of social issue addressed.



Photo credit: Led By Her's Annual Report

A model based on volunteering and memberships

So how does it work? Led by HER should be thought of as a 'model school' for women entrepreneurs. In fact, the adventure started when Chiara pitched the idea of an incubator for women victims of violence and/or exploitation to major French business schools. Two of them, IESEG School of Management et ESCP, were sold to the idea. The schools provided their administrative support, some of their professors' time as well as their rooms for the time of the programme. Additionally, Led by HER offers a personalised and individualised support with professional mentors. Trainings and workshops last one year from September to June and are squeezed into two days each week to enable flexibility.

Led by HER is proud to stay that it is promoting a new way of doing business and challenging the lines that society uses to think about organisations' functioning and objectives. The organisation is at the cornerstone of a social, human right and a women entrepreneurship issue. Similarly, the company's business model is quite innovative as it relies on participants donating their time and skills while a network of members pay a fee as a token to be part of the community. The women participating in the project also pay a symbolic fee (about EUR20 per month) for their education.

It starts and ends with 'soft skills'

When asked about the type of training offered, Chiara responds that 30% to 40% of the training provided is about personal development. As Julie, one of the women present in the project, mentions, the personal development skills acquired through mentoring are the most precious part of the process as it enables these women to ask themselves the right questions about their own motivations and passions. Soraya, another woman in the program, says mentoring helped her 're-center herself on what she wanted to do and to be'. For her, the training was particularly important to learn how to rebuild trust in herself and the community she became part of. For Julie, the programme develops an ability to distance yourself from your negative thoughts, giving these women the strength to go through with their projects in spite of their doubts.

So what are key traits of entrepreneurs? Julie says 'patience and perseverance'. Chiara says something very similar. In her TED talk, she says 'creativity is giving yourself the right to fail'. In my conversation with her, she stressed "you need to take decisions and risks that go with them. So many of the women we work with want to make their project perfect but [launching without worrying about perfection] is actually what is going to create success for your project: if you never launch you never get feedback and you never learn. It is not easy because once you throw yourself in the game, you will make mistakes and fail but the storm passes. [...] The first step for people to know if their idea is good or bad is to put it out there".



Video credit: 'Creativity of Self-Renewal' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5oImP0fvMQ>

What about men in all of this? Chiara thinks that there is not enough emphasis placed on the personal development side for men entrepreneurs. She says that the big difference between Led by HER and other incubators is that they "focus a lot on the identity of the person". The aim is for the women to learn who they are, what their talents are, what is unique about them and what they can bring to the table. "From there, you create a project not the other way around" she says. "It is pretty much accepted that women incubators use more coaching and introspection and there is not enough men doing that, while they would also benefit from it".

The dos and don'ts

I asked her about successful techniques she has spotted to help candidates' personal development. She instantly answers 'storytelling': "A lot of the women had broken stories and they were almost embarrassed by the fact that things were not linear. So when we did the storytelling exercise, they figured out that they were doing what they were doing because of who they were and they assumed that with pride, which made a big difference for them".

Chiara also mentions a workshop where women participants had to create a work of art, with the idea that the process is very similar to entrepreneurship: "you have to have an idea, to make it happen, to disrupt the status quo". The exercise was very powerful to show the participants the endless resources they have and the fact that if they focus on a set project for a given time, they can go to the end of it with their own tools.

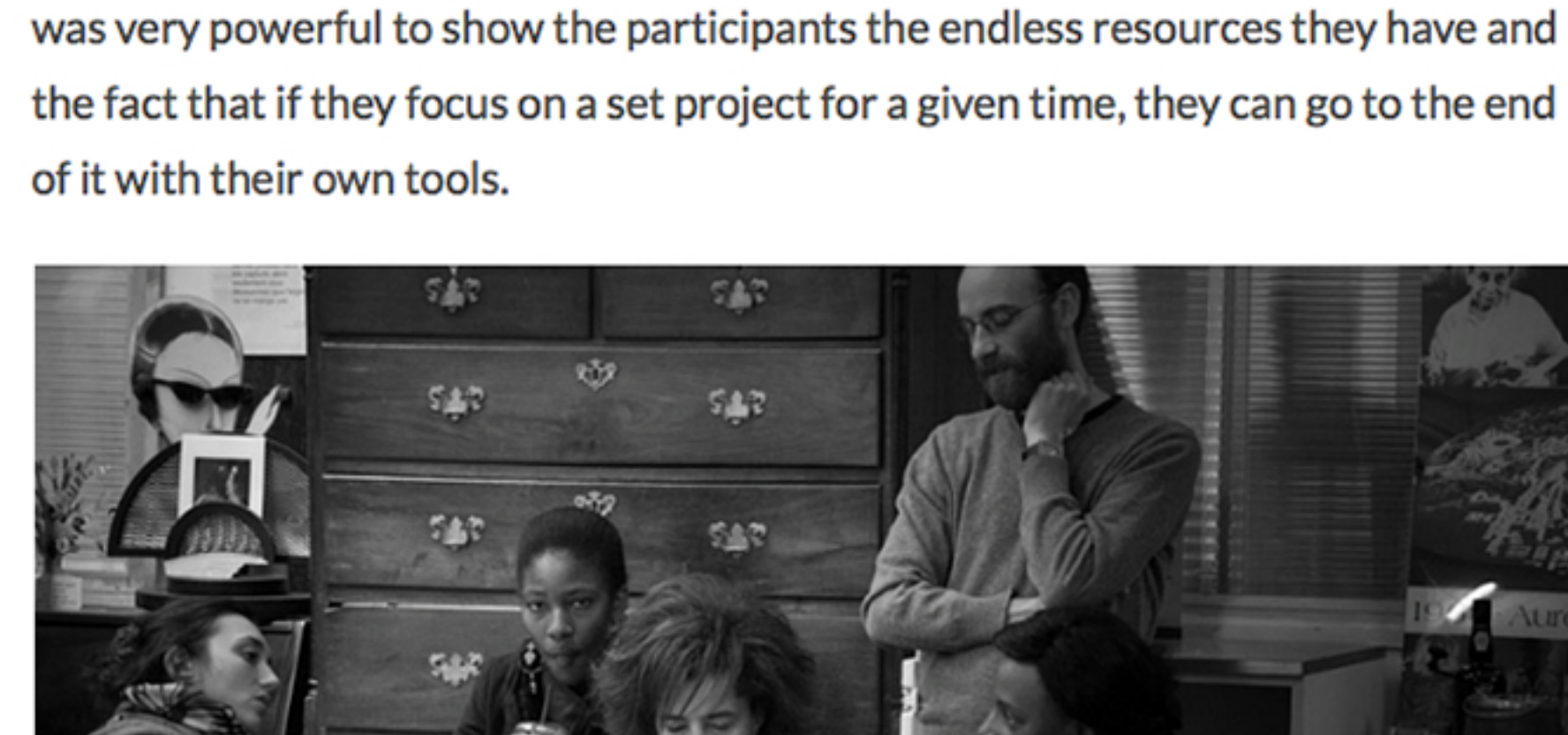


Photo credit: Led By Her's Annual Report

On the challenges, however, Chiara mentions that it is a mistake to focus too much on a person's identity alone, which should only be seen in the context of the project. "It is very tricky when you touch people's identity like that. Because Led By HER is working with people who have such a heavy past, it is important to keep in mind that we are helping them to find their story, as a condition for them to build their project, not to repair their past or anything else".

What are the next things to watch from Chiara?

For the Led by HER project, Chiara is looking at extending the learning period when needed and to personalise better the offer to each candidate. More generally, Chiara is looking to use her learning experience from Led by HER to create a wider platform helping all women in their entrepreneurial projects. She thinks what is lacking at the moment is a network of experts and shared knowledge to support women in creating their companies, especially at the start of the process. So let's wish Chiara the best on this new venture and I cannot wait to hear more about her experience with it!

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Intel has become gender conscious but not equal

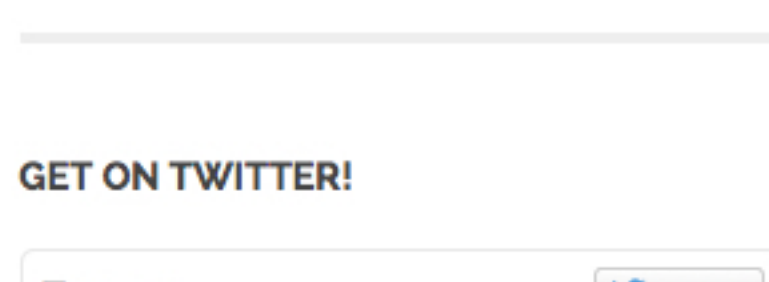
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