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A Conversation with Natasha Wheatley of Solar Sister

Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself with your first and last name? Tell me a bit about yourself and what led you to the work you do today.

Natasha Wheatley: My name is Natasha Wheatley, and I’m the Impact Hub Director at Solar Sister, which operates at the intersection of climate change, clean energy access, and women's entrepreneurship—three issues I deeply care about. Their unique approach really drew me in. I’ve worked in various nonprofits, primarily ensuring organizations have the data they need to make informed decisions. My focus has been on making sure that data is high-quality, accessible, and well-structured. I wanted to apply those skills to Solar Sister, where the opportunity to work on three critical issues at once really resonated with me.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me more about Solar Sister? What makes its approach distinctive? I love that you said it solves three things at once—because it really does. How would you describe it to others, and what sets Solar Sister apart?

Natasha Wheatley: I talk about Solar Sister in two ways. One is the broad theoretical approach—addressing climate change, energy access in Sub-Saharan Africa, and women's entrepreneurship and empowerment all at once. Women in rural communities make most household energy decisions—whether to buy kerosene, candles, or firewood—so we knew going in that they were key to creating change.

The other is the tactical approach. Our goal is to recruit, train, and support women in building their own clean energy businesses to uplift themselves, their families, and their communities. We work in last-mile communities—places that are physically remote or otherwise difficult to reach due to extreme poverty. We look for women interested in entrepreneurship and train them in business skills like budgeting, writing a business plan, and building confidence, along with understanding clean energy products and their value.

Beyond training, we connect them to the supply chain so they can choose products to sell and provide additional support, including digital training for those with smartphones and access to credit to help them grow. Women choose how long they stay with us. Some have been with Solar Sister for over a decade, evolving with new products and mentoring others. Others participate for a year or two, using it as a stepping stone.

What makes Solar Sister unique is that we help women build a network of entrepreneurs while allowing them to engage in a way that fits their needs. We never turn away those who want to continue learning and growing.

Ashley Hopkinson: Beyond the supply chain connection, training, budgeting, and community support, are there any other key benefits that stand out for the women you support? What do you see as the top ways they benefit when they engage with Solar Sister?

Natasha Wheatley: The number one benefit is the training. We provide targeted training on the products, but we take a broader approach—helping women build business plans, learn budgeting, and understand general marketing principles.

I haven't looked at the data recently, but about 50% of the women we work with go on to start another business or expand an existing one. For example, someone might already have a small business, and after our training, they decide to invest in chickens and start selling eggs. The skills they gain stay with them forever, allowing them to apply them however they see fit.

Another key benefit is that we're always looking for new ways to support them. One example is digitization—helping women access smartphones at an affordable cost, since device access is a major barrier in rural Sub-Saharan Africa, especially for women. But we don't just provide access; we also train them in social media marketing and even basic skills like taking good photos for digital posts.

Lastly, the peer network is invaluable. A woman who has been in the business for 10 years might attend a meeting and share advice with newcomers—suggesting markets, new strategies, or different products to consider. This creates a strong support system

where women encourage each other. If someone is struggling, there's always someone to say, *"I've been there too,"* which builds a sense of camaraderie and resilience.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work? What do you think about the approach that contributed to that success?

Natasha Wheatley: To reach these communities, we have business development associates (BDAs)—essentially field agents who don't sell directly but recruit, train, and support women in building their businesses. They know these communities well because, in many cases, they come from them and understand the realities these women face.

One example comes from Nigeria, where a BDA met a woman who was deaf and struggling to make ends meet. Without services for people with disabilities in her community, she had been relying on neighbors' charity to survive. The BDA didn't know sign language, but she was determined to help. Together, they developed their own way of communicating—learning some of the woman's existing signs and creating note cards with product details and prices.

Now, this woman runs a successful business. She goes door to door demonstrating products, negotiating with customers, and making sales. She quickly learned how all the products work and built her confidence along the way. In video interviews, she talks about how someone believing in her gave her the confidence to work with others and communicate in new ways.

Another example is a woman in Tanzania who was a subsistence farmer. She needed to supplement her income, as farming was difficult—she was growing enough to feed her family but had little left to sell. When a BDA introduced Solar Sister, she decided to invest a portion of her farming profits into the business.

After two years, she had saved enough to hire someone to manage her farm so she could focus on her Solar Sister business full-time. Now, she not only maintains her farming income but also provides employment to a neighbor. She shifted her focus to where she had the greatest opportunity without giving up her land, creating another job in her community in the process.

Ashley Hopkinson: What about the Solar Sister approach made those successes possible? I imagine having phenomenal people on the ground and strong community connections played a big role. From your perspective, what specific aspects of your approach made each of those outcomes possible?

Natasha Wheatley: I think it's the fact that we let women engage with us the way they want to, and we help modify our support to fit their needs. I mentioned that they can stay with us for as long as they want—10 years, two years—but it's also about helping them write business plans and set their own goals each year.

They decide their goals. They say, *"I want to make enough money to buy a refrigerator,"* or *"I want to make enough money to not have to farm anymore."* It's about empowerment—they know what they need in their lives, so they decide what they want out of the business and we figure out how to support them in getting there. They're not employees; they're building their own businesses. I think that is super unique, particularly to Solar Sister, especially in the clean energy market in Sub-Saharan Africa. The solar light market is largely dominated by field agents who are hired to go out, sell, and move from community to community.

This is a very different approach. It's about staying in your own community. You don't have to report to a boss every day. You're not constantly checking in. You communicate with your BDA as needed—asking questions, ordering products—but beyond that, you're empowered to make your own decisions about your business. You meet with your group of women once a month for training, but ultimately, you're in control. I think that matters a lot.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thinking about the support you've received with Solar Sister, what's something that has been really instrumental in helping you scale or expand?

Natasha Wheatley: We've seen success with funders who genuinely want to help us innovate and try new things but also understand the need for flexibility. When you're innovating, you have to make adjustments, and having funders who are willing to adapt makes a huge difference.

A great example is our digital literacy training. We recognized that some women had access to smartphones but were missing out on sales because they didn't know how to market in a digital world. One donor worked with us through multiple iterations—developing training, helping women access smartphones, and teaching them how to use WhatsApp for business. Now, we know that women who receive digital training earn about 48% more than those without it. The second key factor is having donors who understand the challenges of reaching last-mile communities. These areas are often expensive to serve, which is why for-profit businesses don't invest in them. Some places where we work require traveling for hours on dirt roads, making it a costly effort.

Impact in these communities doesn't always look big at first. In the first six months, a woman might only earn an extra $5 to $10 a month. To a donor in the West, that might not seem like much, but in these communities, it can determine whether a child goes to school or a family can afford medicine. The long-term effects of those small gains are life-changing, even if they take time to fully materialize. Those donors who are willing to fund the foundation, understanding that it takes time to reach these communities and make an impact, and those who stick with you even when things don't go exactly as planned or take longer to figure out the details, make all the difference.

Ashley Hopkinson: When you're working in these communities, it's an all-day commitment—if you're going there, that's your whole day. It seems like a bold shift is needed in the funding landscape to truly center the voices closest to the problem. Do you think any specific changes are necessary to make that happen, especially for communities in remote areas?

Natasha Wheatley: One of the first things that come to mind is the challenge of proving impact. Donors who focus on impact are great—I have no complaints about that—but the effort required to collect the necessary data to demonstrate impact is severely underfunded. Donors understandably want funding to go toward programming and execution, but that leaves civil society organizations struggling to find ways to collect the data needed to show the results funders care about.

A specific example is in the clean energy market, particularly with carbon mitigation. Many donors use results-based financing or carbon credit financing, which requires extremely detailed tracking. You need to know the name, phone number, and geolocation of every customer and product sold. Gathering that level of data is incredibly time-consuming, especially in places like Sub-Saharan Africa, where there isn't a structured postal system. To verify installations, you often have to physically locate homes based on descriptions like, *"Along the Low Caine road past the Muslim Arabic school, 2 kilometers down on the right."* Even then, you're hoping a GPS satellite can pick up a signal. The challenge in the funding space is that while we want to provide solid impact data, collecting it requires significant time and resources. A shift is needed to recognize and support the effort behind gathering this information.

Ashley Hopkinson: Did Solar Sister receive any capital support or assistance from Rippleworks that we can discuss today? Whether it was an investment in training or a monetary grant, do you know about that aspect of the work?

Natasha Wheatley: We worked on a project with Rippleworks, though there wasn't direct funding—at least not in my experience. Maybe there was in another case, but I can't say for sure. The project I worked on was focused on technical support. Rippleworks connected me with experts in the field to help pilot and test solutions for

some system challenges, specifically around customer data collection. Since collecting that data can be difficult, we were looking for ways to make it more efficient. I met regularly with Rippleworks and the technical expert, who worked with us pro bono. Together, we went through the project from start to finish—piloting, testing, and reviewing the results. So while there wasn't funding involved, the technical support we received was valuable.

Ashley Hopkinson: Based on your experience with that technical support, did it help you get down to the nuts and bolts of what you were looking for in your systems exploration? Was it valuable in achieving your goals?

Natasha Wheatley: Yes, it was a really successful pilot in that we learned a lot, but ultimately, it was too short for us to iterate enough and reach a final solution. We identified some things that didn't work and a few that did, but I finished the project without a clear answer on what to do next. Part of that is because we were tackling a really difficult problem. I'm grateful for the expertise Rippleworks provided—it was incredibly helpful—but I wish the project had been longer. If we had more time with that expert or had been connected to the next specialist we needed, it would have helped us take the next step and fully resolve the challenge. Rippleworks was clear about the project length from the start. Maybe we underestimated how complex the problem was, which is why it felt like we ran out of time.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share an example of something you tried that didn't quite meet your expectations? What did you learn from it, and how did it benefit you in the long run?

Natasha Wheatley: This isn't a project I worked on with Rippleworks, but if that's okay, I have another example. One of the things we've tried to improve is how we deliver training asynchronously—so women can refresh what they learned in monthly meetings or catch up if they missed a session. A big challenge, though, is access to technology. Only about 10% of the women we work with have smartphones, but we wanted to test a digitally delivered training model as a supplement to in-person meetings.

We partnered with a company that provides a digital training platform—an Android app. We invested a lot of time and effort into building training modules, even hiring someone to help develop them. But in the first year, the uptake was *zero*. No one was using it. We had to take a step back and dig into why. The women had told us they wanted an easy way to revisit what they learned, so we assumed this was the perfect solution. But when we looked closer, we found the only people engaging with the app were those whose BDAs reminded them to do so—not because they were naturally inclined to use it.

It turned out that many BDAs weren't confident using the platform themselves. We had trained them, but if they weren't very tech-savvy, the training wasn't enough to make them comfortable teaching others. And even women who had smartphones often used them in very basic ways. Downloading a new app, remembering login details—these were bigger barriers than we had anticipated.

We paused the program for a while, then went back to our funders and said, *"We want to try again."* This time, we focused on addressing those earlier challenges—improving BDA training and making the process easier for users. In this second iteration, we've seen much better uptake and confidence. It's still not perfect, but it's working much better than our first attempt.

Ashley Hopkinson: It gave you some information on how to make things better?

Natasha Wheatley: Yes. We took the time to figure out why it didn't work the first time. Then we went back to our funder and said, "We want to try this again. Here's what we've learned and why we think it will be different." They bought in and helped us do it.

Ashley Hopkinson: What advice would you give to someone looking to start their own version of Solar Sister—something that reaches last-mile communities and helps women build their entrepreneurial skills to create meaningful change in their part of the world?

Natasha Wheatley: Never make assumptions—that's my biggest piece of advice. If you think you have an idea that will help people, do the work to make sure that's actually true before moving forward. And even when you're setting it up, don't assume anything.

I come from a data background, and at one point, we had some mapping data that we thought would be really useful to share. But I quickly realized that most of the women we worked with had never seen a map before. It wasn't about teaching them to use the data—I would have had to start by teaching them how to read a map. Luckily, I figured that out before it became a problem. Even when you know a community well, even if you live there or grew up there, there are things you'll assume you understand that you actually don't. That's why you need to constantly ask questions—before, during, and after building your program. Keep checking in and be willing to adapt. Assumptions can be what doom you because you'll be stuck wondering why something isn't working when, in reality, it was just based on a false assumption.

Ashley Hopkinson: If you had to name the top three things that would help Solar Sister scale or sustain the organization at another level, what comes to mind?

Natasha Wheatley: If I were to describe my ideal funding partner, the first thing would be someone who understands and is willing to fund the support services that make program delivery possible. We need admin staff in each country to ensure data accuracy, track inventory, and process submissions properly. Their work is essential, but since it's not directly tied to a specific program, it can be hard to justify to funders. The same goes for our data systems like Salesforce and TaroWorks—they're expensive, but without them, we can't track or verify impact. We need funders who recognize these as necessary overhead costs and are willing to support them.

Second, we need funders committed to the long term. A one- or two-year program is great, but real impact requires sustained support. Ideally, we'd have funders who say, *"We want to fund you for a year, but with the intention of continuing for up to five years, adjusting as needed."* I'm not asking for unrestricted funding, but some level of commitment allows us to build programs that won't disappear when the funding runs out. Without that, we have to be overly cautious with how we allocate resources, because there's no guarantee we can sustain a successful program beyond its initial cycle. A funder who sees the bigger picture and is willing to work with us on a long-term plan would make a huge difference.

These programs can't stand on their own after just a year—that's not how nonprofits work. It's not about expecting funders to support us indefinitely without accountability or adjustments, but about starting with the understanding that this is a long-term commitment. A one-year program should be the beginning of a partnership, with a mutual agreement that, as long as progress continues and we work well together, the intention is to support the program for five or ten years. That kind of long-term commitment would be incredibly meaningful.

Ashley Hopkinson: Would it also be helpful if funders signaled the potential for future support? Not just a casual indication, but something like, *"We'll start with one year, but there's potential for this to grow into a longer-term commitment."*

Natasha Wheatley: We have a new funder like that, and the relationship has been really helpful. They're funding a specific project at an agreed amount—not a huge sum, but enough to make an impact.

From the start, they told us, "We fund for one year at this amount, but assuming the project goes well, our intention is to continue funding for another two years. We always start small to establish a new relationship and make strategic choices, but if things go well, we anticipate increasing funding in year two and year three. We're not promising anything, but that's our vision." That kind of transparency is incredibly valuable. It helps us plan, set clear expectations, and build a strong relationship. We know what they're

looking for, and they know what we're delivering, which makes everything more effective on both sides.

The biggest challenge is balancing foundational support with targeted program funding. We need both—every nonprofit does—but donors tend to find specific, targeted programs more appealing.

The issue is that foundational support impacts everything we do, but when a donor funds a very specific program in a very specific area, it creates additional reporting burdens. We have to track overall impact at a country level while also generating separate data and impact reports just for that small area.

Their reasoning for focusing on a particular location is often solid, and we're not opposed to it. But it adds administrative strain, which increases program costs. A more streamlined reporting approach—aligned with our broader impact tracking—could reduce that burden while still showing meaningful results in their chosen area.

This is something we frequently negotiate with donors. We respect their focus, but we often have to ask, "Can we discuss how we report on this to reduce complexity? Can we align it with our existing impact data rather than creating an entirely separate process?" Finding that balance is key.

If an organization has 10 donors, each with unique needs and reporting requirements, it creates an administrative burden that pulls resources away from the actual programs. You want as much funding as possible going directly into the work, but at the same time, you have to meet each donor's specific requests. Since you've agreed to their grant terms, you're required to deliver on their reporting expectations, but managing different requirements increases the risk of errors. Staff may struggle to keep track of what each grant requires, and field teams end up navigating different rules depending on where they're working that day. This complexity raises costs, adds confusion, and creates extra work—all while you're just trying to get it right and focus on delivering impact.

Ashley Hopkinson: Well, Natasha, thank you so much. This was wonderful. Great talking to you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist and editor based in New Orleans, Louisiana. She has reported and led coverage on education, immigration, health, social justice and the arts for 15 years in U.S. newsrooms. She's worked for The Associated Press Bureau and the USA Today Network and most recently, the Solutions Journalism Network as a project manager and the Poynter Institute as a media consultant developing training materials for journalists.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*