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Leila Janah's 'microwork' - power to many

Daniel Scheffler

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Leila Janah's philanthropic business connects impoverished workers across the globe. Photo: Ved Chiravath / SF



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When entrepreneur [Leila Janah](#) talks about her philosophy for life, she quotes [Benjamin Franklin's](#) 13 virtues - inspiring for a technology-driven life, much less the founder and CEO of Samasource, a social "microwork" business with a

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philanthropic bent.

No one had really heard of "microwork" until the Harvard grad coined the term in 2008 during her talk at TEDx (the nonprofit Technology, Entertainment, Design) in Brussels.

"If outsourcing was generating billions of dollars for a few rich guys in India and China, why couldn't the same model create a few dollars for billions of people in poor countries?" she asked.

The 30-year-old San Franciscan and Boston native got the idea for Samasource - which takes large projects from companies like Google and Microsoft; breaks down those projects into small tasks, a.k.a. microwork, through its technology platform Samahub; and connects impoverished workers across the globe with those small jobs - while she was working in New York as a management consultant at [Katzenbach Partners](#) (now Booz & Co.).

Janah incubated Samasource when she moved to Silicon Valley in 2007, taking a post as a visiting scholar at Stanford's Program on Global Justice, led by Professor [Joshua Cohen](#). Now the organization is growing exponentially, creating two spin-offs: Samahope and Samausa.

Samahope is an experiment in crowdfunding surgeries in developing countries that Janah began in 2011. Samausa, launching early next year in Northern California, is a pilot program funded by the [California Endowment](#) to train low-income community college students to support themselves through online work.

Janah and Samasource, with their combined [Twitter army](#) (@Leila_c and @Samasource) of more than 320,000, are attracting fans across the world.

Samasource is among the winners of this year's Innovation Award for the Empowerment of Women and Girls from Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#). "Leadership belongs to those who take it," said Facebook COO [Sheryl Sandberg](#) of the award. Melanne Verveer, the ambassador at large for Global Women's Issues, said Samasource's proposal

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"truly holds the promise of transforming the lives of women and girls."

And it's not just her biz-tech savvy or philanthropic work that grabs attention. Apparel brand Sorel asked Janah to be its spokeswoman this fall, because she is "a perfect embodiment of their brand values" according to the company's creative agency, BSSP. "She's stylish and beautiful," Creative Director [Tom Coates](#) said, "but more than that, she's a person of substance who's not content to sit around. She's compelled from her core to pull on her boots, go out into the world and see what she can do to make it better."

"I feel like the awkward gangly Indian girl in a roomful of Betties," Janah said, even though she has been on magazine covers, including Fast Company. "My personal style comes from *jugaad*, a Hindi word meaning doing more with less." She said there is a new era emerging in style and that philanthropy is the new luxury.

"Bling is passe, and I like my style to reflect just that. Ruthless editing defines true style perfectly." This from a woman who uses Rent the Runway for gala attire.

Jetting between her offices in San Francisco and Nairobi, Kenya, she said she packs as little as possible - and never checks bags. She opts for a classic sheath dress that carries her across the continents, and "I own a shameless number of ethnic necklaces acquired at local markets in developing countries or inherited from my grandmother. These have seen me through meetings in Davos and visits to refugee camps."

Eventbrite President [Julia Hartz](#) - who selected Janah as her pick in [Wired magazine's](#) "Smart List 2012: 50 People That Will Change the World" for her masterful way of utilizing iOS and CrowdFlower and focused pursuit - describes the entrepreneur as an inspiration. "She's truly bold in the risks she takes to alleviate poverty, empower women and take advantage of technology to achieve her mission," Hartz said.

So, when she is not blogging or tweeting or serving on the [San Francisco board](#) of the [Social Enterprise Institute](#), what does the former cheerleader do with her time?

"My daily routine is like this: I'm up at 6-ish, I work out (running or boxing) or write, and



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then it's calling my team and meetings for the rest of the day," she said. In her private time, she likes to hike in the California mountains with her boyfriend, read or "simply try to beat my iPhone at Scrabble."

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