13. EDI and innovation through an intersectional lens: understanding the role of innovation policies in promoting inclusive ecosystems

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

Increased focus on the role of entrepreneurship and innovation in boosting productivity and achieving sustainable economic growth has led to a range of different innovation-focused policies and interventions globally (Pettersson and Lindberg, 2013). In the UK, innovation is perceived as defining the next decade through its contribution not only to the country's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to the government's efforts to 'level up' underperforming places (Connected Places Catapult, 2022; HMSO, 2022). As a result, the government has an overarching goal of making the UK a 'global hub for innovation' by 2035, which places innovation at the centre of everything the nation does (SIT and BEIS, 2021). However, the UK Innovation Strategy 2021 also recognises the importance of addressing existing inequalities in order to achieve this goal. This realisation has led to policies that focus on promoting 'inclusive innovation', which draws on the talents and ideas of people from all backgrounds and which involves the different stakeholders within the business community (Connected Places Catapult, 2022; SIT and BEIS, 2021). Innovate UK's Strategic Delivery Plan 2022–25 'No Limits' mission that aims to promote greater diversity in innovation is one example of this.

Furthermore, the UK Equality Act of 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Challenge Unit, 2019) have also assisted in mainstreaming equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in UK policymaking. At the same time, there have been increased efforts by researchers and policymakers to understand the entrepreneurial journey of under-represented groups, including women and ethnic minorities (Carter *et al.,* 2015; Ram and Jones, 2008; Vorley *et al*., 2020). Such a focus is not surprising, given the significant contributions

by ethnic minority and women entrepreneurs to the UK economy (Legrain and Fitzgerald, 2021; Rhodes, 2019), as well as their resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hart *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, despite the long-term existence of government policies aimed at addressing the challenges faced by under-represented groups (Marlow *et al.*, 2008), there has been limited success in achieving the intended outcomes.

One shortcoming is that, even though many innovation policies and interventions might pay greater attention to the gendered aspects of innovation, they still largely adopt a 'one size fits all' approach (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Johnston *et al.*, 2022; Lee and Pollitzer, 2016). In adopting such an approach, existing policies and initiatives fail to recognise the heterogeneity of under-represented groups and underestimate the significance of additional barriers created by intersecting identities such as age, social status, ethnicity, race and ability status on the under-represented innovators' entrepreneurial journey. In aiming to provide insights on factors influencing engagement in innovation by under-represented groups, this chapter adopts an intersectional perspective that recognises both the individual and broader structural factors that influence the entrepreneurial process and engagement in innovation. It draws on existing studies examining the barriers and challenges faced by under-represented innovators (Owalla *et al.*, 2021; Vorley *et al.*, 2020), to explore the role of innovation policies in promoting greater equality, diversity and inclusion in entrepreneurship ecosystems. The chapter provides insights on the factors influencing engagement in innovation and highlights implications for innovation policies and for interventions that promote equitable business environments and inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

13.2 PROMOTING EDI WITHIN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEMS

13.2.1 Focus on Inclusive Innovation

Innovation policies, broadly defined as policies affecting innovation, have been introduced during different periods under a variety of labels, such as industrial policy, science policy, research policy or technology policy (Edler and Fagerberg, 2017). However, even though innovation policies are central to many countries' growth agendas, they have mainly focused on minimising economic disparities (Connected Places Catapult, 2022) rather than promoting social inclusion (Planes-Satorra and Paunov, 2017). The majority of these policies focus on product development within high-growth industries such as technology and manufacturing (Lindberg *et al.*, 2015). These are also highly gendered sectors that are mainly male-dominated, perpetuating the perception of innovation as masculine in nature. This 'stickiness' of masculinity

with innovation has been attributed to the gender hierarchy created by social structures (Alsos *et al.*, 2013), and is still evident in today's innovation-driven economy where women continue to be highly under-represented in science and technology sectors (Walters and McNeely, 2010). Furthermore, the focus on product innovation has supported the economic core rather than the periphery, leading to the creation of innovation 'winners' and 'losers' and fostering inequality and exclusion within ecosystems (Foster and Heeks, 2015; Guth, 2005).

The need to address these growing social inequalities has precipitated a move towards promoting inclusive innovation policies in order to achieve greater inclusive economic growth. While there is no agreed consensus on how inclusive innovation should be defined, a growing literature focuses on understanding how innovation policies in developed economies can be made more inclusive (Lee, 2023). Such policies aim to broaden the participation of under-represented groups in innovation activities (Foster and Heeks, 2015; Planes-Satorra and Paunov, 2017), and similar to Stanley et al. (2018), are broadly defined as follows in this chapter:

> Inclusive innovation policies are directed towards ensuring that the benefits and the risks of innovation are more equally shared. These policies will actively consider whose needs are met by innovation and how excluded social groups could be better served, focus on initiatives that promote broad participation in innovation, and take a democratic and participatory approach to priority-setting and the governance of innovation.

Inclusive innovation policies can therefore play a role in fostering inclusive economic growth by tackling current misallocation of resources in economies through focusing on addressing inequalities and exclusion (Planes-Satorra and Paunov, 2017). They adopt a broader, more inclusive focus that considers marginal groups and social inclusion in addition to profits and core economic growth (Foster and Heeks, 2015). Inclusive innovation policies also consider the social and relational aspects of entrepreneurship and innovation phenomena. Entrepreneurial ecosystems – 'a set of interconnected actors, institutions, organisations and processes that formally and informally combine to connect, mediate and govern performance within the local entrepreneurial environment' (Brown and Mason, 2017; Stam, 2015) – are as much a social phenomenon as they are an economic one, and their growth and development to a large extent depend on the social ties and networks amongst individual innovators, as well as the multiple stakeholders (Alvedalen and Boschma, 2017; Spigel, 2017; Wurth *et al.*, 2021; Zahra *et al.*, 2014).

While inclusive innovation policies have resulted in greater attention to increasing the participation of individuals from diverse backgrounds in innovation activities, challenges still exist. First, it is argued that there is a tendency

for innovation policy strategies to focus on the new and exciting, rather than the effectiveness of technological solutions in addressing complex social problems (Lee, 2023). Second, the inclusion discourse is often articulated in terms of quotas (that is, who is included and who is not) rather than addressing structural inequalities (Jiménez, 2019). As a result, many inclusion policies focus on outcomes rather than on the process of exclusion, that is, understanding the ways in which power and material resources are unfairly distributed (Jiménez, 2019).

Innovation and technology development are highly gender-skewed, with greater importance being ascribed to masculinised sectors, such as manufacturing and high-tech industries, than to feminised sectors, such as education, the public sector and service industries (Alsos *et al.*, 2013; Kuschel *et al.*, 2020). It is therefore important to adopt a holistic approach to understanding the whole lifecycle of the innovation processes (Foster and Heeks, 2015), as well as the factors influencing the individual actors involved in the process. This includes understanding who is participating in innovation, who is involved in setting the priorities for innovation policies, and who is managing the outcomes and impact of innovation on different social groups (Stanley *et al.*, 2018). Taking this into consideration, there is a need to explicitly recognise how hierarchical structures within ecosystems impact under-represented innovators' access to resources, participation and support within ecosystems (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Dy and Agwunobi, 2019). Moreover, these inequalities are exacerbated in times of crises, as evidenced by studies carried out on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on under-represented groups (Martinez Dy and Jayawarna, 2020).

There have been numerous policy interventions dedicated to women's entrepreneurship internationally (OECD, 2021). These include interventions to mitigate the exclusion of women entrepreneurs by improving their access to funding, networks, role models and, in a few cases, mentors (Klingler-Vidra and Liu, 2020). However, many of these initiatives tend to be short term, small-scale and fragmented, which limits their impact on stimulating equal opportunities in entrepreneurship and innovation (OECD, 2021). There is also a tendency to assume homogeneity within under-represented groups, adopting a blanket approach that underestimates the impact of additional barriers created by intersecting identities. Promoting diversity and inclusion within ecosystems necessitates a more sustained approach that is not only focused on the outcomes, but also on exploring and understanding the systemic issues impacting innovators' access to resources (Thomas, 1991). In this respect, adopting an intersectional perspective provides us with a critical lens through which to analyse both individual-level and broader structural factors influencing under-represented groups' engagement in innovation.

13.2.2   Adopting an Intersectional Perspective

An intersectional perspective recognises the fact that different identities, such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, ability, age and so on, do not operate in isolation as mutually exclusive identities, but as multiple reciprocal identities that shape complex social inequalities (Carastathis, 2014; Jiménez, 2019). It focuses on understanding the interactions between social identities of difference at the individual level and the broader social practices, cultural ideologies and institutional arrangements, as well as the subsequent outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Davis, 2008; Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008). It therefore provides a critical lens through which to examine nuanced and complex within-group comparisons, while emphasising disadvantage and privilege status at individual and societal levels (Atewologun, 2018).

While there is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of understanding the additional barriers created by intersecting identities (Vorley *et al.,* 2020), less attention has been paid to understanding the broader systemic issues that create advantages and disadvantages for innovators. There is also the danger that such a focus on individual differences (often reduced to identities) results in a focus on what differences matter the most (Anthias, 2012). In trying to understand how an individual's multiple identities impact their position within society, we move away from the idea of separate groups or categories of intersecting identities, and focus instead on understanding how the social world is shaped by implicit and explicit hierarchies that perpetuate social inequalities (Martinez Dy, 2020). These differences are viewed as a set of dynamic processes that change over time, and can impact entrepreneurial enablers such as education, experience and resources (Dy and Agwunobi, 2019).

By focusing on understanding how intersecting identities position women innovators in society and impact their access to resources, this chapter provides insights into the processes of inclusion and exclusion within ecosystems, and how innovation policies can more effectively promote inclusive economic growth.

13.3   METHODOLOGY

This chapter draws on qualitative data collected during a previous study focused on understanding the challenges of supporting diversity in business innovation (Vorley *et al.,* 2020). The data was collected through focus groups held with ethnic minority groups in London, Birmingham and Sheffield during the period June to August 2019. Focus groups comprising a total of 16 participants (5 males; 11 females) included those involved in business innovation, as well as those interested in engaging in innovation. The discussion in

this chapter specifically focuses on the intersectional challenges and strategies employed by ethnic minority women entrepreneurs.

13.4 INTERSECTIONAL CHALLENGES TO ENGAGEMENT IN INNOVATION

Our analyses highlight the ways in which intersecting social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class and nationality, influence how under-represented groups are positioned within society, and the subsequent impact this has on their engagement in innovation.

13.4.1 The Role of Intersecting Identities

Intersecting identities of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality position women innovators at the periphery of entrepreneurial ecosystems by portraying them as 'outsiders'. This process of exclusion is expressed through participants' discussions of 'being different' or 'not fitting in', which also leads to additional psychological barriers such as lack of self-confidence. As one participant indicates, this increased self-doubt can impact how one perceives opportunities:

> You know, I don't think people are intentionally trying not to give you a job; however, it happens. I was having a conversation with somebody this morning about the same thing and I said, 'You know, when I used to apply for jobs, you'd see a job and you'd say, "Shall I? Do I really think that that company would want to employ me? Would I fit in there?" That kind of thing. Whereas, certain other people don't have that barrier first straight away.

Innovation discourses, as well as the use of jargon, are other practices that can result in under-represented groups feeling excluded from the mainstream:

> Actually, I think a lot of the time when you're trying to break into sectors like this, a lot of the language is really quite high level, and really quite, like, it's a bit of a club for who knows how to speak like that. People say things like 'impact' and words that actually you just don't really learn, from the communities that I'm from.

In order to address these barriers, participants focus on building resilience and drawing on their unique qualities or experiences in order to be innovative:

> So, from a skills perspective, I would say that like, you know, a BME person, young or older that wants to get into innovation needs exactly the same skill as their peers that aren't BME but there's also like maybe an appreciation that isn't there that they will also have to be so much more resilient than everybody else.

However, as another participant notes, it is not an easy task to balance between trying to be unique and wanting to fit within the existing systems:

> So for me, the difference was definitely my innovation, and that's what made me who I am… I think you need to embrace that, because I think something that is an instinct in any human thing is that you want to belong to a group, so you don't want to be different, you don't want to stand out… So for me, it's like you have to stand out and make sure you're different because that's when you can compete in a market nation.

13.4.2   The Role of Socio-economic Class

The findings also emphasise the intersecting impact that socio-economic class has on women entrepreneurs' positioning within ecosystems. One's social position strongly influences the type of opportunities one has to develop human and social capital within the family, school and marketplace (Anderson and Miller, 2003). In most cases, a higher socio-economic class status results in a privileged position within societal structures that allows under-represented groups to overcome some of the disadvantages experienced within ecosystems as a result of intersecting identities of gender, race and ethnicity. Those with lower socio-economic status, or from less advantaged backgrounds, are positioned in ways that further marginalise their access to social capital and financial resources compared to those from more advantaged backgrounds.

As one participant explains, finding relatable role models for under-represented groups from more disadvantaged backgrounds is still a challenge:

> And then there's not enough role models that are BME and also from a low-income family. So, a lot of the role models I do meet that are BME are like me, in that they've also gone to a top university, so they have actually then had quite a lot of privileges. But I don't often come across people who are just, like, haven't had some element of privilege to allow them to get where they are, which means that for a lot of young people for whom that is not a path, that is an option, there really are not any role models.

Overall, these (un)intentional practices and processes of exclusion within ecosystems perpetuate existing inequalities by limiting individual agency and impacting the types of resources under-represented groups are able to access within ecosystems.

13.4.3   Impact on Access to Resources and Identification of Opportunities

Exclusive processes that position under-represented groups as 'outsiders'' within the ecosystem also have an impact on their identification and

exploitation of opportunities. For example, participants highlight how participating in mainstream homogeneous networks and pitching events further emphasises their sense of exclusion and not belonging:

> …I mean, that happens a lot and when you go to networks and you see, it's, like, clones, you know, middle-class men, white, who are talking the same and there's no diversity in business networks.
>
> Yes, I could probably say again, if I think about going into a networking event or doing a pitch to some buyers, it is always a scary experience, because I walk into a room and nobody looks like me.

Limited access to social capital implies that women innovators have fewer experiences to share and learn from others in mainstream ecosystems. More importantly, it results in limited access to relatable role models and mentors who are crucial for providing advice and guidance to potential innovators. However, participants also emphasise the important role played by targeted initiatives, friends and family as well as the wider community, in providing access to this otherwise limited social capital.

> Another thing that we're doing recently that goes to the self-esteem point, and building confidence and resilience, is we set up a BME network, so that all of the BME young people that are in the different businesses, that might be the only person that they relate to immediately in their business, because they look and sound like them. We're going to be running, like, discussion forums, debates, motivational speaking sessions, trips, so that they feel they have networks, too.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that many existing strategies to address the intersectional barriers encountered in the marketplace are mainly focused on the individual and communal levels. While these activities are important for overcoming existing barriers by enabling under-represented groups to more effectively navigate the ecosystem and gain access to crucial resources, they fall short of addressing the broader structural issues perpetuating existing social inequalities. In fact, some of these activities, such as building resilience, gaining confidence, developing own networks, could inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities by normalising experiences of exclusion within ecosystems.

The practices and processes of exclusion of under-represented groups from involvement in innovation are not only linked to intersecting identities, but also to broader structural factors, such as societal expectations, cultural norms and spatial context (Treanor, 2021). Discussions around promoting inclusive innovation should therefore focus on understanding how boundaries are created, rather than simply trying to accommodate under-represented groups within highly unequal ecosystems (Jiménez, 2019).

13.5   PROMOTING INCLUSIVE INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

In order for inclusive innovation policies to play a more effective role in promoting EDI within ecosystems, they need to adopt a more holistic approach that moves beyond a focus on individual identities to understanding how these intersecting identities interact with broader social structures, including the space and place within which innovation occurs. Inclusive innovation initiatives should be appropriate for the institutional, cultural and social contexts within which they will be implemented (OECD, 2021). This would include a better understanding of how innovators access resources within ecosystems, their interactions with multiple stakeholders, as well as the role of formal and informal institutions in facilitating or impeding engagement in innovation.

Second, in order to transform existing systems and promote more inclusive innovation, there needs to be a greater emphasis on gaining a better understanding of the processes of exclusion and inclusion within ecosystems (Jiménez, 2019; Wurth *et al.*, 2021). This necessitates a better understanding of existing networks and relationships within ecosystems and how different processes and practices might result in the inclusion or exclusion of under-represented groups. It also calls for medium- and long-term evaluations of existing targeted and mainstream interventions, in order to understand their effectiveness in promoting inclusive ecosystems, and to identify possible bottlenecks. Such knowledge would be useful in identifying good practices across initiatives and assist in the development of more effective interventions.

Third, greater attention needs to be paid to changing existing discourses and perceptions of what innovation entails, who is involved, where it occurs, and what the benefits are. A broader, more inclusive view, which goes beyond the prevailing focus on high-tech and manufacturing sectors, will better facilitate the inclusion of more diverse sectors and social groups. Broadening the communication efforts to reach a more diverse group of potential innovators is also necessary. However, changing existing systems and cultures is a complex process and will require the joint involvement and long-term sustained efforts of all stakeholders, institutions and actors within the ecosystems. Providing the necessary platforms for such engagement should therefore be a priority for initiatives seeking to promote inclusive innovation.

13.6   CONCLUSIONS

This chapter contributes to our understanding of how innovation policies can promote greater EDI within ecosystems in order to achieve inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Adopting an intersectional perspective, it provides

insights into how intersecting social identities influence how under-represented groups are positioned within social structures, and the subsequent impact this has not only on their access to resources, but also on the identification and exploitation of opportunities within ecosystems. In order to promote greater EDI within ecosystems, inclusive innovation policies need to adopt a more holistic approach that goes beyond a focus on individual identities to recognising the complexities of the broader social factors perpetuating inequalities within the business environment. Inclusive innovation policies also need to move beyond accommodating under-represented groups within existing unequal systems to understanding the processes of inclusion and exclusion that create these boundaries.

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