

Applying a Gender and Diversity Lens to the Innovation Ecosystem

While entrepreneurship and innovation are the foundation of economic growth and social development in Canada, an inclusive innovation strategy must also address opportunities across sectors including service industries, agriculture, natural resources, tourism and recreation, the arts, social enterprises, government and public services.

Inclusive innovation also requires ensuring that the innovation ecosystem is open to all. Yet research has shown women, immigrants, Indigenous people, and others often face barriers. The Diversity Assessment Tool can help reveal barriers and strategies at all levels to create an inclusive innovation system.

The Ecological Model: Macro level:

The Diversity Institute's Ecological Model explores the interaction of factors at the macro, meso and micro level in advancing diversity and inclusion in the entrepreneurship ecosystem. For example, the broader culture embeds gender stereotypes often reinforced in the media of entrepreneurs which are highly gendered and culturally specific, shaping the aspirations and role models of potential entrepreneurs. Policies at the macro level, for example, concerning child care, parental leave, immigration, or benefits can have a profound effect on opportunities for women and other under-represented groups. Access to infrastructure—affordable internet, the technology and skills needed to access it are critical but not evenly accessible. For example, racialized and marginalized communities, even in large urban centres, have less access to technology. In fly-in or remote Indigenous communities, even access to telephone service may be a barrier. Applying a gender and diversity lens to government investments in innovation—research and development, innovation and business supports, tax incentives—reveals significant issues. Businesses can, for example, write off golf club memberships but not childcare or eldercare.

The Ecological Model: Meso level

Whether we are considering postsecondary institutions, startups, incubators and business intermediaries, financial institutions or established businesses, a gender and diversity analysis of key stakeholders in the ecosystem can help create more inclusive approaches:

1. Leadership, Governance and Decision Making: Ensuring the leadership, governance and decision making groups are diverse sends a signal about who belongs and also ensures diverse perspectives are brought to bear in the development and delivery of services. “Tone at the top” is important in building an inclusive culture and signalling the importance of diversity

Research on entrepreneurship has shown that women and immigrants (often racialized minorities) face significant barriers in accessing support to start their own businesses even though this is the preferred pathway for many (Cukier et al., 2017).

2. Strong and Transparent Recruitment, Selection and Support Processes: In addition to ensuring inclusive human resources processes are in place, organizations must apply a diversity lens to ensure they are reaching diverse groups and offering fair access to products and services.
3. Values and Organizational Culture: While Western norms for selecting and supporting entrepreneurs are often typified by “Dragons Den”-type pitching contests and competitions, these often have embedded in them implicit bias that disadvantages immigrants, women and other groups. Venture capitalists, for example, often make decisions based on “instinct” and focus on “founders” and this can reinforce a tendency to pick people just like them. Building a culture which recognizes the value in different styles and approaches and focuses on more objective measures of success will provide more opportunities for diverse candidates.
4. Measure and Track Diversity: Unless the organization measures and tracks the results of the implementation of these policies and practices ensure that the stated commitment to diversity is translated into action. Does the pool of applicants for programs and competitions reflect the community? Do the successful entrepreneurs reflect the pool? Benchmarking and transparency are critical.
5. Integrate or Mainstreaming Diversity across the Value Chain: This allows the organization to consider diversity through every dimension of its operations from procurement, to service offerings, to marketing and communications.
6. Developing the Pipeline: We know that building entrepreneurial culture starts young.

The Ecological Model: Individual (Micro) level:

Analysis at this level considers perspectives and experiences of diverse women entrepreneurs. This is because enabling conditions shape and bias individuals’ preferences, aspirations and behaviours. Language and definitions of entrepreneurship and innovation also impacts the ways in which individuals self-identify and express their entrepreneurial ambitions and aspirations.

