



CIMR Research Working Paper Series

Working Paper No. 66

Women entrepreneurs: positioning equality, diversity and inclusion leadership in times of crisis

by

Helen Lawton Smith

Department of Management, Birkbeck, University of London

& CIMR

h.lawton-smith@bbk.ac.uk

June 21 2022

ISSN 2052-062X

Women entrepreneurs: positioning equality, diversity and inclusion leadership in times of crisis¹

1. Introduction

In the equality, diversity and inclusion space of policy making, many women have distinctive voices as leaders and advocates on behalf of minority entrepreneurs. Examples of disabled women entrepreneurs are used here as examples of both policy advocates and practitioners in bringing about system change in a time of crisis. Women per se, and even more in the case of disabled women have often been more marginalised in access to resources than are other categories of minority entrepreneurs.

This paper draws on research undertaken in 2020 and 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic². It explores the regional geography of specialist support for disabled entrepreneurs in the UK. The research involved online interviews with specialised formal networks that support entrepreneurs, with disabled entrepreneurs, with policy makers and with academics working in the field. The evidence shows that the Covid 19 pandemic brought a set of challenges but also opportunities for disabled entrepreneurs. The proposition put forward here is that people with disabilities, particularly women, can be able to respond quickly in times of crisis because of their lived experience of dealing with crises associated with their disabilities.

The perspective on disability is that during the pandemic, physical spaces of interaction had to be adapted to be social spaces of interaction, knowledge exchange and learning, mentoring and advocacy. The research question addressed here is, under what conditions do disabled women emerge as leaders in a time of crisis such as Covid-19? The analysis also highlights how disabled people can play a full role in economic recovery, including from the effects of the Covid- 19 pandemic.

What can be observed from the evidence is that women acting as individuals or using their positions as leaders of networks are speaking to regional, national and international audiences

¹This paper is based on a draft for a Paper prepared for *Building Back Better - Post Crisis Women Entrepreneurs* Nada Basir and Bessma Momani (Eds)

² [Addressing regional inequalities in innovation opportunities for ethnically diverse and disabled entrepreneurs – Centre for Innovation Management Research \(bbk.ac.uk\)](#) (accessed April 19 2023)

on behalf of other disabled entrepreneurs. Their intention is to heighten awareness of the challenges facing disadvantaged entrepreneurs. They speak to policy makers, to business and increasing to academia. Their actions show the actual and potential agency of women leaders speaking on behalf of marginalised while having to address their own marginalised status. The context is the under-representation of entrepreneurs and innovators in the economy described by OECD (2021) as “missing entrepreneurs” - groups which include women and people with disabilities.

The conceptual framework is that of regional stakeholder theory (see Lawton Smith, 2012) combined with social capital. The context is that of an intersectional space of disabled women as role models and as leaders of influential organisations who advocate on behalf of other disabled entrepreneurs. Disabled women leaders have to manage their own conditions and speak on behalf of very diverse populations of disabled people to a wide range of actual and potential regional and national stakeholders. A contribution this paper makes to the literature is a gendered approach to a regional stakeholder perspective from a multilevel perspective – local, regional, national and international.

The paper is organised into four further sections. In the first is a review of the literature on disability entrepreneurship and the interpretation of women leaders through the use of regional stakeholder theory. This is followed by a presentation of the study methodology and then a section which addresses the research question. Finally, some conclusions are drawn.

2. Literature review

2.1 Disability and agency for change

It is essential to introduce the specifics of disability that makes women disabled leaders distinctive. Disabilities are extremely diverse (World Health Organisation/World Bank, 2011) and are not a fixed characteristic of individuals. That is, disability is often a temporary condition rather than a permanent status. Popular stereotypes of disabled people as permanent wheelchair users or as blind from birth persist, shape public perceptions and inform policy approaches (Kitching, 2014). This also means that policy makers require a recognition of how the needs of disabled entrepreneurs differ from those of non-disabled people. These include the extra financial, time and inconvenience costs associated with being a disabled person for example with mobility and digital access. However, covid saw a major push on technologies for networking and conferencing and enabled much quicker and far-reaching communication

possible so that distinctions of disability were less obvious in many circumstances and the extra costs were less with the non-disabled experiencing needs in adopting the new paradigms.

As well as a physical condition, disability is recognized as the social marginalization of people living with impairment whose experiences are contextually (negatively) mediated by social, material or cultural influences (Williams and Patterson, 2019). Defining what is meant by disability helps position how and why social inclusion within entrepreneurship ecosystems (EE) (Stam, 2015) requires systemic change. This is how disabled entrepreneurs gain access to entrepreneurial resources (physical, networks, emotional support), being participants in cultural change, as well as societal recognition of their contributions to entrepreneurship and innovation.

2.2 Women leaders, disability source of agency – interactive process

Strong evidence exists of the marginalisation of disabled women entrepreneurs in positions of authority. According to data shared by the United Nations, only 2.3% of disabled women hold positions as legislators, senior officials, or managers.³ This statistic illustrates the critical importance of recognizing the voices and needs of disabled women entrepreneurs in bringing about a more favourable environment for disabled entrepreneurs as a whole. This is both because of how women are positioned as being absent within the discourse of entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2012) and because disabled people's experiences remain marginal to entrepreneurship research (Williams and Patterson 2019). Indeed, there is ample evidence that women entrepreneurs' participation and access to resources differ from their male counterparts (Berger and Kuckertz, 2016) and that studies explaining how, when and why variations by gender and minority status might occur are largely missing from ongoing discussions (Brush et al., 2019; Tonoyan and Strohmeyer, 2021; Wheadon and Duval-Couetil, 2017). This is important because intersecting multiple social identities and existing structural hierarchies within the wider society influences women entrepreneurs' social positioning in economic spaces, and impacts their ability to access resources, legitimacy and power within entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) (Atewologun, 2018; Knight, 2016). In practice many female entrepreneurs have a fundamentally different experience to those who are male (British Business Bank 2020).

³ <https://ilf.scot/blog-post/more-disabled-women-are-needed-in-leadership-positions/> (Accessed March 12 2023)

Women as convenors: a regional stakeholder approach

The stakeholder theory of strategic management emphasises the active management of the business environment, relationships and the promotion of shared interests. It is also a systems theory which focuses on interdependencies - the development of collective strategies that optimize the network (Freeman and McVea, 2001)⁴.

While in stakeholder theory, the firm is at the centre of the stakeholder map or system, in a different interpretation, the primary agent could be an individual either speaking from their own experience or from that of the organisation(s) they lead. Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory incorporates other parties, including governmental bodies, political groups, trade associations, trade unions, communities, associated corporations, prospective employees, prospective customers, and the public at large.

Stakeholder theory can be used for 'understanding a system by identifying the key actors or stakeholders and assessing their respective interest in that system' (Grimble et al., 1995, 3–4). This can be a geographically defined spaces as a place or a region. Nijkamp et al. (2023) find that stakeholders and citizens share insights and expertise on pressing actual issues. In a place, an outcome of such interactions is that not only can an involvement of local stakeholders lead to a better identification of real problems, but it may also lead to more support for necessary policy actions.

Stakeholder analysis can be deployed to differentiate and study stakeholders on the basis of their attributes, the criteria of the analyst or convenor appropriate to the specific situation and the opportunities from the perspective of each stakeholder. These may include the relative power and interests of each stakeholder (Freeman, 1984), the importance and influence they have (Grimble and Wellard, 1996) and the networks and coalitions to which they belong (Freeman and Gilbert, 1987). This can also be interpreted as the extent to which they add value to a regional economic and social system.

The idea of convenors, introduced by Svendsen and Laberge (2005), helps to focus on relative power relationships within and external to a region through the legitimacy of their leadership of networks or from their own agency. This concept relates to the relative influence of different

⁴ Some of the text on stakeholder theory is taken from Lawton Smith (2012)

stakeholders – again the issues of the primacy of some agents – and to communication with other actors and networks in an EE. Such stakeholder networks have been defined as, ‘a web of groups, organizations and/or individuals who come together to address a complex and shared cross-boundary problem, issue or opportunity’ (Svendsen and Laberge, 2005, 92).

Convenors are the centre of networks. It is their task to help a multi-stakeholder network to tap its latent energy, resources and intelligence to generate novel solutions and whole-system innovations that no single member could achieve on their own. Of key importance, which relates to agency, is the observation that ‘anyone can convene a network if they have the legitimacy and social capital needed to bring the key people together around a particular issue’ (Svendsen and Laberge 2005, 92). Agency as a process relates to the role and status of economic agents in relation to other agents and relevant institutions, and social circumstances (Clark, 2002).

Minority entrepreneurs have been described as “marginalised stakeholders” by Chowdhury and Sarasvathy (2022). Dues to the lack of status, minority entrepreneurs face additional barriers to overcoming disadvantages of ethnicity or disability in accessing entrepreneurial resources (finance, mentoring, premises, employees).

Social capital is a complex, context dependent concept. However, there is a general agreement that social relations that have productive benefits⁵. Luoma-aho (2016) argues that, “Social capital theory examines how social relationships once formed can benefit individuals and organizations beyond their original context of creation. Social capital is a metaphor from other types of capital, an investment to be made, consisting of trustworthy networks and social relations that enable collaboration and other benefits. The value of social capital lies in its ability to transfer and facilitate other forms of capital beneficial for individuals and organizations.”⁶ How this works may change in times of crisis when different kinds of engagement between stakeholders take place.

In the context of disabled entrepreneurship Drakopoulou Dodd (2015) finds that social capital (as well as wider knowledge, experience, and access to resources) is especially critical to disabled entrepreneurs’ start-up success and subsequent venture growth. Yet, as a result of their relative exclusion from educational and workplace interactions, the disabled are usually placed

⁵ [Definitions of Social Capital • Institute for Social Capital \(socialcapitalresearch.com\)](https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/definitions-of-social-capital/) (accessed April 11 2023)

⁶ [Sage Reference - The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation \(sagepub.com\)](https://www.sagepub.com/reference/encyclopedia-of-corporate-reputation) (accessed April 16 2023)

at a major disadvantage in terms of being able to develop the requisite social capital and networking ties needed to support (successful) entrepreneurship.

Therefore, for disabled women entrepreneurial leaders, a challenge is to establish legitimacy in order to speak on behalf of other disabled entrepreneurs, both as women and as a disabled person. Such legitimacy is based on reputation effects and the perception that specific organisations and agents have the power to effect or influence change in economic and policy processes. They are legitimate in that there is a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman ,1995, 574).

The interpretation of regional stakeholder theory from a gender and social capital perspective is that individuals, in this case disabled women leaders, can affect the environment, as well as the environment affecting the individual (knowledge, lived experience etc). This is by investing in relationships and developing social capital that will ensure sustained change.

At the regional level, different maps for each of the stakeholders can be used to show where they overlap, in their perspectives on the regional economic environment on the basis of their own interests, their relative influence and where there are gaps in the system. Collaboration is related to attitudes, behaviours and outcomes of different partners based on common or different goals (Castaner and Oliveria, 2020). Influence at the regional level is also dependent on the special interests of participants for influence, information and financial resources (Storper and Salais 1997).

Against this conceptual background, it is necessary to address the conditions under which disabled women entrepreneurs have become advocates for change in a time of covid. The framework suggests that the following conditions apply: factors which have led them to become leaders of organisations or an individual leader; thence the source of legitimacy to become a leader; and how they incorporate different kinds of organisations through the use of social capital so as to give them a voice on behalf of their constituencies.

3. Methodology

The data analysed in this paper is based on a research project funded by the Regional Studies Association (2020-2021). It examined the geography of support in the form of locally focused specialised as well as online networks, and national available to ethnically diverse and disabled entrepreneurs in the UK. The study was a follow-up to a 2019 study funded by the UK government's innovation agency, Innovate UK, 'Supporting diversity and inclusion in innovation'. The focus on this new study was actual and potential disabled and ethnically diverse innovators. The research was conducted through a national survey and focus groups. The gap identified in this study was that the geography of support for those groups was largely absent. The new study focused primarily on mapping where support was available and why location matters. In this paper, only data relating to disabled women entrepreneurs is analysed. The study was carried out in two main stages.

The first involved an exhaustive mapping exercise (March 2020- June 2021) designed to identify, by UK region (including the devolved countries), all dedicated networks specifically supporting either ethnic minority entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs with disabilities, or both groups as well as specialised professional bodies. This included locally-based and online only networks. In addition, in order to map the landscape national, devolved government-based policy initiatives designed to support entrepreneurship and innovation amongst these two groups were included. Various sources and search processes were used in the search processes networks using a snowball technique of recommendations from the already known networks, the Innovate UK project Advisory Board, government agencies and web searches based on keywords.

The advantage of using the snowball technique is that provides access to hard-to-reach populations. In this case the populations had all of these characteristics; they are small relative to the general population; they are geographically dispersed and possess a particular shared characteristic of interest (Nikolopoulou, 2022).⁷ In this case the characteristics were disability and/or ethnic minority. In total 77 organisations were identified 64 of which responded to requests for information and/or interviews.

The sample relating to disability entrepreneurship included 10 networks, 9 policy or parliamentary bodies, a national disability organisation, 2 business organisations/trade bodies (e.g. Federation of Small Businesses, FSB), 5 academics and 4 other regional bodies (31 in

⁷ [What Is Snowball Sampling? | Definition & Examples \(scribbr.co.uk\)](https://www.scribbr.co.uk/what-is-snowball-sampling/) (accessed June 18 2023)

total). The ones which did not respond included 2 networks specialising in disabled entrepreneurship, two devolved region organisations, four policy making/advisory bodies and two trade bodies. The gender share of the 31 responses was

As part of the mapping process, data were collected on universities supporting the target groups from interviews with the specialised networks, web searches and a request for information through an Enterprise Educators monthly bulletin. This line of enquiry was unexpected at the outset of the project but as the analysis will show, universities have become increasing important stakeholders in disability entrepreneurship and as two-way a source of legitimacy.

In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with networks about their activities. All 10 networks for disabled entrepreneurs identified in the mapping exercise were contacted for interview. From these, interviews were conducted with 8 specialised networks, 3 individual entrepreneurs, 6 policy bodies (for example Cabinet Office Disability Unit, Innovate UK), a national organisation which gives awards to disabled entrepreneurs, and 5 academics. There was an equal balance between male and female interviewees.

The interviews focused on understanding the extent to which location is a factor in what they are able to achieve, the links they have with other local and with national organisations, and the challenges they face in providing support. Additional interviews were also conducted with some policy making bodies such as Innovate UK-UKRI and the Cabinet Office Disability Unit. These are examples of parts of government where there is willingness to engage with the disability entrepreneurship sector. Other interviews were conducted with disabled entrepreneurs who were put in touch through the networks.

For this study, data collection involved several sources and two iterative rounds. The first round relied on secondary data such as observations, archival sources, up-to-date news reports and an extensive review of secondary data and literature on entrepreneur support in the UK. The second round relied on field interviews as the primary source of data, as well as up-to-date secondary data analysis.

Field interviews, as the primary sources of data, were transcribed and analysed (using coding, themes and extraction using NVivo 12 Plus). Themes were produced in relationship to the background of the organisation, its excellence, the effect of location on activity, as well as evident policy implications. To triangulate the interviews' analysis, secondary data such as archival data, news and public reports were gathered and analysed in each individual case.

Three examples are given of women leaders all of whom were interviewed during the project. Two are disabled women who founded networks in order to improve the lives of other disabled people. The third is a social entrepreneur. The case studies include their public facing identities and what they say about the challenges facing them in a time of crisis.

4. Analysis

This section develops a regional stakeholder approach and social capital to consider the conditions under which disabled women emerge as leaders in a time of Covid-19. Case studies of examples of three women leaders are the founders of the Inclusive Entrepreneur Network, Jacqueline Winstanley based in the North West of the UK, and the SAMEE project (Samantha Everard) based in the South West and Shani Dhanda, a disabled entrepreneur and a well-known advocate of disability inclusion, based in London.

Factors which have led them to become leaders of organisations or an individual leader; from then the source of legitimacy to become a leader; how they incorporate different kinds of organisation through the use of social capital so as to give them a voice on behalf of their constituencies, and how the pandemic has affected what they do and how. All three see themselves as change-makers.

Case studies

Case study 1 Jacqueline Winstanley

Jacqueline Winstanley's background is that she has always been an entrepreneur. As a strategist and convenor, she excels at identifying where conflict exists between policy intent, its administration and working practice going on to engage affected communities particularly those who have pioneered and creating solutions and inclusive working practice. She learnt early on that, "if you want to bring about real and sustainable change, you need to identify what isn't working, propose solutions, pilot and academically validate them to ensure impactful policy directives and supportive pathways."

She started her first business in 1995 She changed the concepts of how to organise short term care for disabled children 'Inclusive Play Care Model' with a blueprint for inclusive play and childcare where disabled children, young people and their families could access just like everyone else.

She later became disabled. She lost her job because of her condition and was unable to get further employment. She went on to set up a business in the D&I arena supported by Access to Work (AtW) an award, scheme designed to help people to get or stay in work if they have a physical or mental health condition or disability. It includes people planning to be or are self-employed. She developed a programme called the Workforce Retention Programme - with people involved in the charity she ran – if they were facing losing their jobs then she would go in and work with the companies to see how they could make things better. Her own condition like those of many disabled people, is hidden. She has been asked in meetings, how disabled are you?’ In reply she said, ‘how disabled would you like me to be?’

In 2012 in response to the employed arena not embracing inclusivity quickly enough she created the Inclusive Entrepreneur Programme and Network which supports disabled people to create enterprise and innovation as a real and sustainable alternative to the disability employment gap.

During the next few years, she had constant battles with retaining and renewing her AtW award. While the award is generous and envied worldwide it is often conflicted between its intent and administration, it struggles to understand the way that disabled people work and certainly does not understand how disabled entrepreneurs work”. She went on to develop a proforma to help others acquire an award.

From her own experience of disability, employment and founding both the universal Inclusion and Inclusive Entrepreneurs Network she has established legitimacy to speak on behalf of disabled entrepreneurs in public arenas: charitable, commercial and political. She is now an international expert and consultant on accessibility and inclusion challenges. she speaks to UK and international bodies, contributes to policy analysis reports and engages with academics. Her reach is global,

“she is committed to the global development of Inclusive Cities & Societies especially within the workplace and access to services: developing and sharing cross sector good practice, championing rights and protections of disabled people and others who face barriers to life’s opportunities.” speaking frequently on this issue at the UN headquarters in New York

As a convenor, Jacqueline has an ability to foster positive engagement with local networks and small groups within the broader policy agenda who can sometimes appear unreceptive and quite protective of what they do when initially met with her proposals. It is her commitment to inclusivity at every level of her work ensuring that those who are most

affected have active representation at all times which has led to positive shifts in public policy and working practice. These are felt more strongly nationally and internationally than locally.

Her authority is illustrated by holding a series of directorships and advisory roles in businesses and organisations including:

Charities and public sector bodies

- Advisory Board Chair / Member to: Ability Today, Foundation for Independent Living Trust, New England Sports for Women, UK APPG Women in Enterprise, Shaw Trust.
- Ambassador / Diversity Lead for: 5050 Parliament, Rivington Terraced Gardens Heritage Project, FilLiA, GlamSticks
- She is a former director of the DRUK Disability Rights UK
- Virgin Start Up Mentor
- Savvitas Special Envoy 2021,22,23

She has been a judge for the Shaw Trust Disability Power 100 List 2021,22,23, Merseyside Woman of the Year Awards 2017 to date.

Academia

- Visiting Fellow, Birkbeck Centre of Innovation Management Research (CIMR)
- Research Associate, Lancaster University

Policy:

Jacqueline provides the secretariate for the All Party Parliamentary Group for Inclusive Entrepreneurship (APPGIE) supported by Savvitas , the creation of which had been a longstanding recommendation of hers. This was set up at the height of the pandemic (2019) in response to Inclusive Entrepreneur Network members expressing their concerns about losing their businesses and being left behind in terms of government communications and responses to the pandemic.

Jacqueline responded very quickly to Covid-19. A digital platform was created moving all of the Universal Inclusion and the network's once real-world services online. As a technophobe this was a challenge. 'Friday Briefings' were launched which ensured members and others

were kept up to date and part of the conversation at this challenging time. One of the key recommendations from the Network and reaffirmed at the briefing on 4th June 2020 where they were joined by Dr Lisa Cameron MP, was the creation of the APPGIE as this is cross party issue.

The APPGIE was formally established in July 2020 to ensure that Parliament is fully informed on what is needed to create and sustain the most beneficial conditions for inclusive economic growth. Its goals are to stimulate, encourage and nurture inclusive entrepreneurship throughout the country, and to engage with entrepreneurs who have protected characteristics, particularly disabled entrepreneurs.

Jacqueline is also a researcher and analyst. In 2022 Innovate UK (the UK government's innovation agency), and the Innovation Caucus, (an academic think tank), agreed to fund a project, *Road to Wonder* (2022-23), designed to provide evidence on challenges to disabled, innovative entrepreneurs. Jacqueline is the co-lead along with the author of this paper. In this way she is directly involved in the policy-making process as the object of the study is to provide evidence used by Innovate UK to design better innovation policies for disabled entrepreneurs.

Summary

Jacqueline's sources of legitimacy lies in ability to speak on behalf and bring attention to broad constituencies in the UK, Europe and the USA, rather than at the local level. Links to academia generate important legitimacy effects and bring a further group of stakeholders into position within the landscape. For her, the advantage for the leaders of networks in working with universities is that universities give credibility to their work by association with their brand and their research, and also from their ability to provide analysis and data services. This is reciprocal as universities benefit from association with practitioner best practice and from the potential impact of their research.

Challenges include resistance to change in some parts of government. For example, problems with the AtW award is a major issue on which she campaigns. While policy and commercial support for disabled entrepreneurs is growing it is still some way behind other societal challenges and also for other minority groups such as black women entrepreneurs. This is particularly pronounced at the local level where embedded cultures and practice mean that there is limited stakeholder engagement and capacity to convene in order to develop further inclusivity.

By contrast, Covid has provided an opportunity for Jacqueline Winstanley to make further impact by speeding up communications and leveraging different parts of the media to speak to wider audiences.

Case study 2 Samantha Everard, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) The SAMEE Charity⁸

This case study illustrates the regional stakeholder and social capital perspective through three things. This is its ethos, its own stakeholders, its engagement with local and national stakeholders and the time of covid.

Background

The founder left school after O'levels (16+), and worked for a number of years in the wedding industry. After she was told that she could not have children because of her disability she adopted a disabled little girl and gave up work.

She then went to the Prince's Trust⁹, which is where she met who was to become her business partner and asked him whether she could set up a small business doing wedding coordination and sales from home. A lot of the work that she did with the Trust was around mentoring the mentors to ensure that they had a full understanding of the types of disabled people involved. Thence her expertise developed into other areas, which is where the charity comes in and does so many things.

About five years ago the two met again and began talking about how disabled people slip through European Union programmes. People may miss out for various reasons, perhaps because of the benefits situation or because they are too highly qualified so they do not actually get business support, because there's none out there. SAMEE was set up basically to support anyone that the other projects wouldn't support.

The sources of legitimacy

⁸ <https://samee.co.uk/> (accessed April 18 2023)

⁹ [Get experience with Get into | Help getting a job | Help for young people | The Prince's Trust \(princes-trust.org.uk\)](#)

The Support And Mentoring Enabling Entrepreneurship (SAMEE) charity was launched in 2015 with “a mission of enabling everyone of all abilities to proudly and independently provide an income for themselves and their families”. It became a charity in 2016.

The charitable purpose is “to enable vulnerable people in the community to explore self-employment by creatively developing their ideas and potential with the ultimate aim of helping them achieve financial independence through successful self-employment and/or improved employability prospects“. The charity now covers 7 counties in the south of England. It has expanded because of a lack of similar support opportunities.

The Charity’s ethos is that exposing people to the different routes into the workplace develops their knowledge, skills and ambitions, which ultimately helps them to remove the barriers to work that they face. The information, advice and guidance that offered is always relevant to their context and delivered in a format which is accessible to their needs.

The way of working is that, “we're definitely facilitators, because it sounds like that we might be in danger of running their business for them, that that's not what we're about”.. So they will always retain ownership of their business ideas. And if they can trade, they're in control. They can obviously use us as a sounding board, even when they're up and running because we do in trade support. “The key word is facilitation”.

The regional stakeholder convening role.

Unlike case study 1, this network’s legitimacy has developed from its local roots which in turn have led to active national policy engagement. The clear link to social capital as a basis for legitimacy and influence lies in this quote from the website.

“To ensure the highest quality of learning and development, we work with key partners in the education, employment and charity sectors. Combining their expertise with that of young and disabled people wanting to explore self-employment in order to stimulate local economic growth and social cohesion within the community. We promote a culture of collaboration to build on many examples of best practice.”

With other local groups there is mixed experience. She finds that the FSB and Dorset Chamber of Commerce expensive. “And they don't actually meet the requirements of the charity. They're expensive and don't meet the needs of her members. The Dorset chamber is an international trade chamber. So they're looking at job generation, they're looking at an inward investment and work alongside the local enterprise partnership“.

SAMEE has access into the council and that through into the police and the transport offices. So we can use it that way. With the FSB, “they are so national that they haven't got that local interest in that local knowledge. I know they're very good at what they do. But they're not good for our startup guys, again, our guys aren't big enough for them. And the fees too expensive. “

She has quite good contacts with Bournemouth University and has supported some of their disability events. She has done a couple of talks on their MBA course.

In the interview, Sam expanded on the convenor role of the charity, specifically in relation to the board of Trustees. A key point is that they represent a broad range of experiences relevant to the charity's members and to its own sustainability.

“They are very, very active. It's very good”.

Members include a man who was self-employed for about 35 years and then had a life changing accident and is now disabled and a lady who is involved with the Community Housing Association. Another is a lady with a guide dog who's fully blind, who's also a qualified nurse. A lady who's a mental health worker and a therapist plus an accountant.

Samantha Everard was invited by the Cabinet Office Disability Unit to be a Chair in the Regional Stakeholder Network¹⁰. “The Regional Stakeholder Network gives disabled people across the UK a stronger voice.”. The 7 chairs are intended to take the lead in supporting and advising the government on issues affecting disabled people and disability organisations in regions across England. Sam was invited to speak on employability rather than issues to do with self-employment.

She said, “And they've taken my view and stance on employability employment, and also on education. But the other place where I fit in, which is where they want to be, is the fact that if you're self-employed, you have to be able to deal with transport, you have to be able to access all the services you've got.”

On policy intervention more generally for example Innovate UK, they could, “actually send some of the government officials, ministers in the disability unit to work with some of us charities, just kind of shadow us for a week. Just see what we do at grassroots level.”

The network's sustained engagement with organisations such as local authorities who lack funding to support the charity. The network believes that if it were in London, it would get

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-chairs-appointed-to-regional-stakeholder-network> (accessed April 18 2023)

more funding. A London location would offer more prospects of raising finance. “If I could have an office in London I would be a happy girl”. There is a tendency for the public perception of the South West to be that it is an affluent area. In part, this is because it is where many Londoners have their second homes. However, there is extensive deprivation in the area.

The need for greater financial support for the charity and the sector as a whole and targeted at the local level is illustrated by this quote, “And at the moment, the government nationally does not have any programme or idea of business support... And what we should be doing is having a three-year programme, which is non-government biased, which is then having its own local nuances, and where we need to drive certain effects into, into the country. And right now, there’s a lot of people going to be looking at self-employment, how we do that within our locality areas, because Cornwall will be very different from London”.

Advocacy

As the charity became established it has taken on a number of challenges facing its constituency of people with disabilities and has become an advocate for change. Sam is a leader, an advocate and provides local and national role models. This example is support for young people with disabilities,

“The other big issue that I have that is something I'm fighting is supported internships. So as an apprentice, you can do that from 16 up to 100. And goodness knows how old if you're not supported in, you can only join one until your GP education health care plan ends at the age of 25. We have got disabled young adults who have been kept within the education system doing functional skills qualification until the day after their 25th birthday, and then kicked out into the public. And they then are now ready to 27 or 28, to start thinking about work to start looking at doing a supportive internship.”

Like case study 1 Sam advocates for change on the way the benefits system works such as the Employment Support Allowance and the Personal Independence Plan (PIP) which work against the self-employed. AtW needs to be put in with PIP and Universal Credit and ESA payments in one pot.

Covid

Covid presented new challenges as everything had to be moved online as is the case for so many organisations. At the beginning of covid, “I was doing phone calls around to our disabled

entrepreneur, with one member of my team, just to see how people are getting on, which is when I started finding out about things like the buses and the other exciting stuff. But what they're actually saying to me is, well, we really want to carry on with our business.”

Particular challenges include supporting disabled people to play a full role in economic recovery from the effects of the pandemic. In this example, the network is supporting more people, even in a time of covid.

Summary

The evidence shows how expertise and engagement with local and national stakeholders has given the CEO legitimacy to lead on disability and self-employment issues, locally and nationally. This woman leader brings visibility and support through local and national sponsorship of the network’s activities. The CEO also sees opportunities for advocacy and ‘disturb status quo thinking’ so as to bring about cultural as well as political change.

Case study 3 Shani Dhanda

Shani Dhanda is a South Asian Woman in her mid-thirties. She has become one of the UK’s most influential disabled people.

The source of her legitimacy for influence lies in her professional activity. As a convenor, she founded and leads Diversability¹¹, the Asian Woman Festival and the Asian Disability Network. All three disruptive platforms are united by the common purpose of empowering underrepresented communities. She helps businesses and brands break barriers and become more inclusive and accessible for their disabled employees. She uses online media to get her messages across. Covid-19 has accelerated that process.

She needs to speak on behalf of disabled people because,

“We don't and we don't understand disability, we have very low perception, we have very, very negative portrayal in mainstream media, you know, of disability. And this affects disabled people's outcomes massively.

When it comes to entrepreneurship, I think so many disabled people would benefit from that. But they don't know how to start or where to get support from. And then people that want to help disabled people don't understand the challenges that they face. So there's a massive,

¹¹ [Diversability | Exclusive discounts for disabled people \(diversabilitycard.co.uk\)](https://diversabilitycard.co.uk) (accessed March 29 2023).

“unemployment crisis” as well for disabled people, which is, again, why I think entrepreneurship is so vital to helping disabled people live the best possible life that they can.
“

For her work, Shani Dhanda was recognised as one of the UK's most influential disabled people by the annual [Shaw Trust](#) Power List, as one of [BBC](#)'s 100 inspiring and influential women from around the world for 2020, and has won some 23 awards for her inclusion and activism work¹².

Shani is a member of the Greater London Regional Stakeholder Network bringing the voices of disabled people and their organisations to policy development for the Government’s Office for Disability Issues.

5. Conclusions

This paper seeks to answer the question, under what conditions do disabled women emerge as leaders in a time of crisis such as Covid-19? Regional stakeholder regional analysis is designed to address what is being done by women leaders to overcome the marginalisation of disabled entrepreneurs. Three women are used as examples to answer this question. They have very different kinds of experience but are united in the common goal of needing to bring about systemic change so that disabled entrepreneurs can have better equality of opportunity in EEs. The conditions relate to their backgrounds, then sources of legitimacy, and how they act as convenors to incorporate different kinds of organisation by the use of social capital to advocate for change in EEs on behalf of disabled entrepreneurs.

By focusing on the women leaders who support disabled entrepreneurs, the particular knowledge gap that this paper addresses is the importance of legitimacy and then advocacy in making those connections and bringing about systemic change. As advocates through their leadership, they increase the visibility of disabled entrepreneurs. Legitimacy is derived from their position of speaking on behalf of disabled entrepreneurs and professionals. The former is that of political legitimacy from being part of democratic government processes whereas the latter is also democratic as members have joined and agreed to the terms of membership. Social capital is crucial as it is the quality of partnerships within and between organisations that

¹² [Shani Dhanda - Naidex](#) (accessed March 29 2023).

underpin the possibility of bringing about change in this case for disabled entrepreneurs (see Drakopoulou Dodd, 2015).

The regional stakeholder approach is based on the notion that the business environment for entrepreneurs begins by being place based. This is where the entrepreneurs start their businesses and seek to work with other local stakeholders in order to improve that environment for disabled entrepreneurs. Thus, in a gendered approach to regional stakeholder theory, in principle, disabled women leaders are primary agents who advocate on behalf of marginalised stakeholders to help to bring about increased local equality of opportunity for particular groups of entrepreneurs. In principle stakeholders and citizens are able to share insights on pressing actual issues (Nijkamp et al., 2023).

Instead, what the evidence here shows, is that no matter how skilled such leaders are in communication, there are intractable situations, structural hierarchies, which partially preclude a convenor role at the local level, this limiting their influence (Grimble and Wellard, 1996, Svendsen and Labarge, 2005). This is even more of a problem for disabled women leaders as in practice they are doubly marginalised as disabled and as women (Atewologun, 2018; Knight, 2016). Thus, interpreting the positioning of equality, diversity and inclusion leadership in times of crisis requires a distinction between legitimacy and social capital (Svendsen and Labarge, 2005), agency and context. As this paper shows, there are co-existing opportunities seized by disabled women leaders in a time of crisis, but system change can still be some way off.

The proposition that disabled women leaders are able to respond quickly in a time of crisis, such as the covid-19 pandemic, is borne out by these three case studies. It is shown that they seize the opportunity to change how they run their businesses, support those of others and advocate on behalf of other disabled entrepreneurs increasingly to national and international audiences. This is an interpretation of Luoma-aho's (2016) suggestion that the context dependency of social capital in leadership builds on social relationships that once formed, can benefit individuals and organizations beyond their original context of creation.

6. Acknowledgements

The author thanks John Slater for his kind comments on an earlier version of this paper and the Regional Studies Association for funding the study on which this work is based, Award number: FeRSA Grant May 2019 Round

7. References

- [Ahl, H.](#) and Marlow, S. (2012). [Exploring the dynamics of gender, feminism and entrepreneurship: advancing debate to escape a dead end?](#) *Organization*, 19, 5. 543-562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508412448695>
- [Atewologun, D](#) (2018) Intersectionality Theory and Practice *Business and Management* <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.48>
- Berger, E.S.C. and Kuckertz, A. (2016), “Female entrepreneurship in startup ecosystems worldwide”, *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 69 No. 11, pp. 5163–5168, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.04.098>.
- British Business Bank. (2020), *Alone Together: Entrepreneurship and Diversity in the UK*.
- Brush, C., Edelman, L., Manolova, T. and Welter, F. (2019). A gendered look at entrepreneurship ecosystems. *Small Business Economics*, 53 2, 393–408.
- Castener, X and Oliviera, N (2020) Collaboration, Coordination, and Cooperation Among Organizations: Establishing the Distinctive Meanings of These Terms Through a Systematic Literature Review *46, 6* 965-1001 <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920632090156>
- Charmaz, K.; Belgrave, L. Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis. In *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*; Sage: London, UK, 2012; pp. 347–365.
- Chowdhury, R. and Sarasvathy, S. (2022). *Toward a Theory of Marginalized Stakeholder-centric Entrepreneurship* *Business Ethics Quarterly*
- [Drakopoulou Dodd, S.](#)(2015) [Disabled Entrepreneurs: Rewarding Work, Challenging Barriers, Building Support](#), Jan 2015, [University of Strathclyde](#). 8 p. (International Public Policy Institute Policy Brief)
- [Freeman, R.](#) (1984) *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Boston: Pitman.
- Freeman, R. and Gilbert, D., Jr (1987) ‘Managing Stakeholder Relations’, in Prakash, S. and Falbe, C. (eds) *Business and Society: Dimensions of Conflict and Cooperation*, Toronto: Lexington Books, pp. 397–422.
- Freeman, R. E. and McVea, J. (2001). *A Stakeholder Approach to Strategic Management* in *Handbook of Strategic Management*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grimble, R, and Wellard, K. (1997) ‘Stakeholder Methodologies in Natural Resource Management. A Review of Principles, Contexts, Experiences and Opportunities’, *Agricultural Systems Journal*, 55,2: 173–93.

- Grimble, R., Chan, M.K., Aglioby, J. and Quan, J. (1995) ‘Trees and Trade-offs: A Stakeholder Approach to Natural Resource Management’, International Institute for Environment and Development, Gatekeeper Series No. 52, 19pp.
- Kitching, J. Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment by People with Disabilities Background Paper for the OECD Project on Inclusive Entrepreneurship (2014). Available online: <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/background-report-people-disabilities.pdf> (accessed on: 12 March 2023).
- Knight, M. (2016), “Race-ing, classing and gendering racialized women’s participation in entrepreneurship”, *Gender, Work & Organization*, Wiley Online Library, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 310–327, doi: 10.1111/gwao.12060.
- Lawton Smith, H (2012) ‘The health technologies sector in the Thames Valley: evolution or optimism in regional development?’ Ch 6 in P.Cooke ed *Re-framing Regional Development* 125-145 London:Routledge
- Miles, M., Huberman, M. and Saldaña, J (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA
- Mitchell, R. K., Agle, B. R. and Wood, D. J. (1997) ‘Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Saliency: Defining the Principle of Who and What Really Counts’, *Academy of Management Review* 22 (4): 853–86, doi:10.2307/259247. [JSTOR259247](https://www.jstor.org/stable/259247).
- Nijkamp, P.; Kourtit, K.; Scholten, H.; Willemsen, E. Citizen Participation and Knowledge Support in Urban Public Energy Transition—A Quadruple Helix Perspective. *Land* 2023, 12, 395. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land1202039>
- Stam, E. (2015). Entrepreneurial ecosystems and regional policy: A sympathetic critique.. *European Planning Studies*, 23, 1759–1769
- Storper, M. and Salai, R. (1997). *Worlds of Production* Boston: Harvard Press
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1994) Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*; Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., Eds.; Sage Publications, Inc.: London, UK, 1994; pp. 273–285.
- Suchman, M. C. (1995) ‘Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches’, *Academy of Management Journal*, 20, 3: 571–610.
- Svendsen, A. C. and Laberge, M. (2005) ‘Convening Stakeholder Networks’, *JCC*, 19, Autumn, Greenleaf Publishing 91, <http://www.sfu.ca/cscd/cli/jcc-2005.pdf>.
- Tonoyan, V. and Strohmeier, R. (2021), “Gender role (in-)congruity and resource-provider gender biases: a conceptual model”, *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 225–242, doi: 10.1108/IJGE-12-2020-0201.
- Wheadon, M. and Duval-Couetil, N. (2017), “Entrepreneurial gender diversity in entrepreneurship through critical theory and reflexivity”, *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 188–202, doi: 10.1108/IJGE-02-2017-0010.
- WHO/World Bank (2011). *World report on disability*

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/665131468331271288/pdf/627830WP0World00PUBLIC00BOX361491B0.pdf> (accessed March 13 2023)

Williams, J. and Patterson, N. (2019). New directions for entrepreneurship through a gender and disability lens. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, 25(8), pp. 1706-1726.

Wurth, B., Stam, E. and Spigel, B. (2021). Toward an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Research Program. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 46(3), 729–778.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1042258721998948>

