Diversity Accelerates our "Everyone a Changemaker" Future

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Abstract

This paper examines what the 2021 Global Fellows Survey tells us about diversity from the lens of Fellows who self-identify as part of one or more minority groups. We find that the opportunity to connect with social entrepreneurs from diverse fields, geographies, and backgrounds within Ashoka's Fellowship has offered a space to further innovate and to build community across a common commitment for change for the good of all. Also, social entrepreneurs that self-identify with minorities contribute to enhancing the scope and quality of the network by representing communities they are proximate leaders in, as well as by contributing key assets, and in their ability to build relationships. Intentionally seeking and fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion is an on-going process key to ensure these positive relationships, interactions and skill sharing happens and accelerates effective change processes.

Introduction

Say you are observing a ball roll down the road. How do you know where it might land? What you observe in its direction and pace of acceleration will tell you it's most likely future position. For 40 years, Ashoka has learned from its leading social entrepreneurs, now approximately 3,700 Fellows, to understand the direction and pace of social innovation and anticipate the way societies will develop across the globe. To strengthen these insights, we carried out a Global Fellows Study in 2021, surveying 817 Fellows across 81 countries (over 25% of the total number of Ashoka Fellows globally) and conducting 32 in-depth qualitative interviews with a random sample of them. This year, for the first time, we included a question about diversity in the survey. This article presents initial findings from this data in relation to the trends and challenges we observe in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in our network and what this might imply for the social entrepreneurship sector.

This is a key theme for Ashoka. Our vision is to create a world where *Everyone is a Changemaker* for the good of all. A commitment to DEI and to our vision is mutually reinforcing: without a robust emphasis on DEI, changemaking risks becoming a skillset and mindset reserved for the privileged few, thus contributing to a new inequality (much like the digital divide) between those who have time, space, and support to be changemakers and those

who do not. Equally important, we know that the best solutions for social problems come from proximate leaders[1]—change leaders who hail from the communities most affected by them. This is core to our search process: we look for social entrepreneurs who have a deep and personal commitment to solving a social problem over the long term, and to which they have a personal connection. Furthermore, when we connect proximate leaders from different communities, new layers of innovation emerge as these social entrepreneurs build connections, replicate, and innovate on one another's ideas, and build new approaches together.[2]

In order to measure our effectiveness and identify trends in relation to DEI beyond gender and geography, the 2021 Global Fellows Study included the question: "In the country you live in, do you consider yourself to be a minority in any of the following regards?" Respondents chose one or more of the following subcategories: race, religion, socioeconomic status, migration, gender or sexual orientation. Although the question does not equate minority status with communities that are socially or economically disadvantaged, we can still assume that identifying with one or more minority groups likely correlates with some form of discrimination or exclusion.

The responses showed the following representation from a global perspective. Of the 733 Fellows taking part in the survey who responded to the question, 43% self-identify as part of one or more minority groups in their national context. Of these, 25% of respondents identify with one minority group, 10% with two minority groups, and 8% with three or more minority groups. Cross-referencing these segments with other questions surfaced several key findings that shed light on issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity.
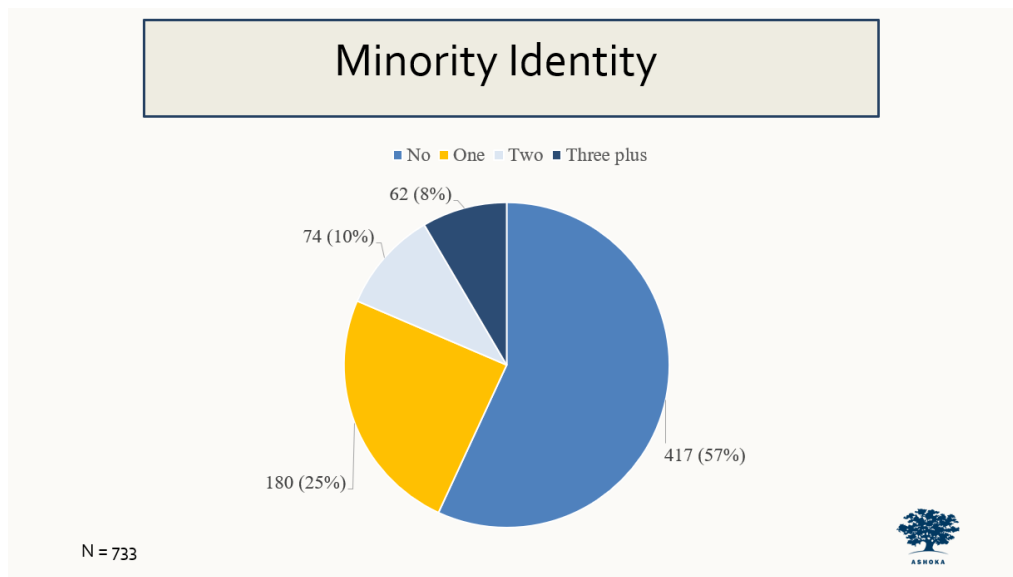

Figure 1: Ashoka Fellows self-identifying with minority groups

Intentionally Cultivating Diversity Brings Key Assets to the Network

Diversity, as mentioned above, is not only central to Ashoka's approach. We also believe it is essential in discovering and spreading innovative approaches to solve social problems. When we

look at individuals who identify with one or more minorities, the data suggest that they bring strengths to the Fellowship. On the one hand, they show a higher rate of embodiment of the notion of proximate leaders. When asked, 70% to 82% report a "deep personal connection" to the challenge they are solving, in comparison to 59% of non-minority identifying Fellows. On the other hand, as data below suggests, they are more likely than others to see and build unexpected connections and relationships, and to focus more intentionally on societal mindset shifts as a key strategy.

A key criterion for Fellow selection is the likelihood of replication of their ideas. This implies a desire of social entrepreneurs to both scale and incorporate new approaches to their solutions. Indeed, over 75% of Fellows taking part in the 2021 Global Fellows Study are seeing their solutions replicated by independent groups.[3] For Fellows who identify with one or more minority backgrounds this rate is significantly higher, averaging 80%. A similar phenomenon occurs in building multi-stakeholder relationships, where 92% of Fellows identifying with 3 or more minority groups affirm that they have built partnerships with four or more types of stakeholders since becoming Fellows, in contrast with 81% of Fellows who identify with no minority. Although further in-depth research is needed, this data and our field experience suggest that Fellows identifying with minorities bring particular skills in relation to building unexpected connections and relationships – such as cross-learning, cross-collaboration and multi-cultural communication – which are vital to replication toward systemic social innovation. This would be unsurprising given research from other disciplines that show higher metacognition levels in people raised in multi-cultural families, which in turn leads to intercultural effectiveness.[4] While we are not saying our Fellows are necessarily from multicultural families, intercultural effectiveness would correlate with greater facility in building partnerships with multiple stakeholder groups.

Beyond systemic change, more Fellows from diverse backgrounds are focused on changing mindsets and cultural norms than those who do not identify with a minority. Mindset shift is a core driver of Ashoka's "Everyone a Changemaker" (EACH) vision. When surveyed, over 97% of Fellows who identify with 3 or more minority groups reported to work on mindset shift, a number that is significantly higher than the 86% of Fellows who do not identify with any minorities and are working on mindset shift. On average, 91.5% of Fellows who identify with one or two minority groups also reported working on changing mindsets. We believe most of these social entrepreneurs have labored to shift mindsets and perceptions in their personal and professional circles simply to be accepted or gain access to resources. This may have enabled them to more quickly build key skills in changing narratives and worldviews, which are important and complex strategies in social innovation. Relatedly, higher percentages of minority-identifying Fellows see Ashoka's Everyone a Changemaker vision as a key strategy for their organizations by 6%. On average, 65% of Fellows who self-identify with minority groups see a high relevance for this vision for their work, compared to 59% of those who do not identify with any minority.

Ashoka's process of identifying leading social entrepreneurs, who by definition of our criteria, have a new system change idea with the potential for national or continental change has

recognized the need to be deliberate about finding solutions from those most proximate to the problem. Moreover, it has been recognized that we must be intentional about how we source these candidates and, in our work, to build global solutions from the patterns across the diversity of our global Fellowship we must build this intentionality of diversity into our core strategies. We also recognize this is a continual process of listening, learning, and adapting strategies even as we work as a global team and as we identify communities, groups and ideas that we may be unintentionally excluding from our sector or professional community. For Ashoka, this has meant looking deeply at our Fellowship and close networks: we wish to identify areas where we must improve – what geographies or peoples are not in our networks, or where unintentional biases are skewing our process – and carry out specific strategies to diversify our networks, in order to identify and invite these highly skilled social entrepreneurs to our Fellowship.

When Ashoka has been deliberate in identifying diverse (in all meanings of the word) nominators we have realized results. These intentional efforts led to key insights. For example, in 2003, Ashoka Brazil published a collection of a dozen articles by Ashoka's social entrepreneurs as a means to put diversity on the agenda for the sector: *Racismo Contemporaneos*. More recently, we launched *All America* in the United States, a strategy to bring our focus to and increase nominator networks in underrepresented communities across the country. This has significantly improved our ability to identify and select Fellows in underrepresented communities including women, non-White and middle America. Within 5 years, our Fellowship went from 34% female to 64%, the proportion of Fellows from non-coastal cities jumped from 38% to 73%, and the proportion of Fellows from underrepresented communities increased from 22% to 51%. Similar initiatives are burgeoning around the globe with new efforts in Ashoka Brazil and Ashoka Europe's current diversity work that focuses on Roma and Sinti, migrant, Black, working class, and rural communities.

Inclusion and Belonging Strengthen Diversity

Beyond selecting diverse Fellows, building an engaged network and creating a 'family' feeling within the Fellowship program has a net positive effect on Fellows from diverse backgrounds. This idea, central to Ashoka's model, aims to provide Fellows with a life-long network of peers and partners they can lean on and with whom they can build new initiatives. The data suggests that Fellows identifying with one or two minorities feel strongly connected to this network (79% and 85% respectively stated feeling "strongly connected" to the network, compared to 82% of Fellows who do not identify with a minority). Fellows identifying with three or more minorities felt less connected (65% answered "strongly connected" and 29% did not feel connected at all).

Over the past year, our Fellowship and DEI teams have also carried out informal interviews and conversations with Fellows to investigate the data more deeply. The conversations resulted in two initial findings that are central to this topic. On the one hand, the Ashoka Fellowship network seems to play a much more powerful role for Fellows from underrepresented minorities and communities. Many are key leaders and role models in their communities and the Ashoka Fellowship provides an essential opportunity to connect with peers, take a step back, see the big picture, and test new approaches with others, based on a common identity as social

entrepreneurs. It has enabled many to connect with someone across the globe working on a similar issue and exchange ideas and learnings. Indeed, Ashoka's network support at different stages is perceived to be very valuable among minority-identifying Fellows also in the global survey. For example, 70% of Fellows self-identifying with three or more minority groups reported that Ashoka helped strengthen and articulate their ideas, compared to 65% of Fellows who do not self-identify with any minority group. Similarly, 43% of Fellows self-identifying with three or more minority groups reported that Ashoka helped shift their ideas to systems-changing approach, compared to 30% of Fellows who do not self-identify with any minority group. Finally, 51% of Fellows self-identifying with three or more minority groups reported that Ashoka helped them see themselves in a new light as leaders, compared to 47% of Fellows who do not self-identify with any minority group.

On the other hand, during the interviews, Fellows who identify with minority groups mentioned that, at times, they feel unintentionally excluded from a variety of networks in the social sector. Although our networks have diversified significantly over the past few years, these reflections still point to a need to invest more intentionally in inclusion and belonging in the sector. In this vein, we created a Fellows Council for Equity in 2021, which Ashoka Fellows have enthusiastically joined to actively evolve an environment where Fellows feel they belong, can contribute fully, and avoid experiencing the same social exclusion they feel elsewhere. They are helping us examine our assumptions, correct design flaws and improve staff diversity and training. For everyone to succeed, we must unleash the power of high affinity and social *personal* proximity in the development of trust-building, which is central to our new EACH strategy.

Acknowledge the Reality and Aim for Equity

Looking beyond Ashoka's own network, equal access to relationships and resources is a key factor to measure in the quest for an equitable "Everyone a Changemaker" world. This is particularly important for social entrepreneurs from underrepresented communities. One prominent Fellow from a migrant background in Europe put it best: "Don't treat me in a special way, just give me access". Our survey data casts light on the urgency of the access challenge and illustrates some of the ways in which equity is improving.

Multiple studies have shown that leaders who come from minority communities in the non-profit sector have less access and receive less funding than those from majority communities.[5] Although we do not expatiate on this in the Global Fellows Study, some of the survey results may speak to this general pattern. For example, Fellows identifying with one or more minority groups self-fund their ideas at a higher rate than others: 31% of Fellows identifying with one or two minorities on average and 70% of Fellows identifying with three minorities, compared to 22% of Fellows not identifying with a minority. Along these lines, 49% of respondents identifying with one minority group, 54% of respondents identifying with two minority groups and 62% identifying with three or more minority groups experienced a reduction in funding due to COVID-19 pandemic in contrast to 43% of those with no minority-identity. Looking ahead, minority-identifying Fellows see inequality as a key factor that will hinder, or enable, recovery

from COVID-19 related challenges (on average, 46% of Fellows who self-identify with a minority in contrast to 36% in respondents who do not identify with a minority). In other words, social entrepreneurs who self-identify with minority groups experience and expect to continue to experience inequity in access to resources and potentially opportunities also in the future.

On a more positive note, the data indicate that the Ashoka Fellowship is an important access provider and equity enabler for minority-identifying Fellows. The Ashoka stipend is the first major funding source for many across the board, but especially for those who identify with 3+ minority groups (62% of respondents). 53% of the Fellows who identify with two minority groups and 46% of the Fellows who identify with one minority group report that the stipend was their first major source of funding for their idea, compared to 44% of Fellows not identifying with a minority.

Additionally, it appears Ashoka's support is a key enabler for more connections and recognition, which are key factors for Fellows to achieve access to decision-makers and resources. A high rate of respondents identifying with minorities report gaining key non-tangible resources such as strategic guidance (79%), mentorship (62%), connections to funders (54%), new partnerships (69%), access to new team members (43%), support in wellbeing (55%), and media visibility (50%) through the Ashoka Fellowship. Besides the impact on these particular Fellows' work, being named and recognized as leading social entrepreneurs is likely to have an impact also on youth and early-stage social entrepreneurs who identify with similar minorities, as they recognize positive examples from their communities in the spotlight. Evidence from education and psychology research demonstrates that demographically similar role models have positive effects on learning and motivation.[6] The case for improving the number and visibility of diverse social entrepreneurs is compelling and self-reinforcing.

Conclusions, Areas for Further Study, and the Work Ahead

These results highlight additional intentional improvements we must make going forward. To create an "Everyone a Changemaker" world, deeper insights from a more fully representative population of social entrepreneurs globally is the knowledge base the world needs to shape the direction of society for the good of all.

These initial results of the 2021 Ashoka Global Fellows Study show how:

- Social entrepreneurs and change leaders overall who represent diverse communities bring particular skills and abilities to the network, and how interactions amongst them bring value. Increasing diversity in the Ashoka and other social entrepreneurship networks implies increasing quality and reach.
- Diversity does not materialize on its own but can be improved through deliberate effort. New challenges to achieve the kind of diversity we need exist and they need to be addressed intentionally, regularly, and systematically.
- Inclusion is essential for diversity to be recognized and to unleash its full value. Peer communities can be incredibly helpful to social entrepreneurs from underrepresented

backgrounds, but these underrepresented social entrepreneurs must also be involved in the design and execution of the communities to avoid unintentional exclusion.

- Selecting and funding individuals from underrepresented communities, and ensuring they have full access to all the resources from the network is a key factor to increasing equity within the social sector and in the world overall.

There is much more to learn and understand. In future studies at Ashoka, we intend to specify the categorizations of minority groups and delineate identities in more detail and have a clearer picture of how these relationships work within particular regions. We plan to present results from qualitative questions around DEI factors and develop long-term metrics to track our progress on DEI efforts.

If *everyone* must become powerful to effect change, then equity must be an aim of each organization. We need more tools, analyses, and initiatives to identify and evaluate blind spots and missing pieces, and adjust structures to avoid creating new inequities. This includes identifying and evaluating our own internal biases, as staff, partners, and social entrepreneurs, as well as intentionally and repeatedly diversifying networks and partners, focusing on communities that are underserved and underrepresented. There is a lot of work ahead of us to create a world where everyone truly is a changemaker for the good of all.

References

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2. For example, Ashoka Fellows working on different aspects of migration joined Hello Europe in identifying key challenges and insights for the field. Many of them also replicated each other's ideas in new countries. See http://hello-europe.eu for more. Similar initiatives exist in Ashoka around Education, Children and Youth, and others, or with our Next Now initiative, that focuses on Tech for Good, Climate Change, Gender and Longevity, see https://www.next-now.org/.
3. Unlike for-profit business, where independent replication is competition, for a social entrepreneur who is seeing to get their solutions into the hands of as many people as possible, independent replication is a sign of success.
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