

'In Conversation with Intersectionality and Innovations' – Black Women Science Entrepreneurs

Chairing this discussion is **Dr Sola Adesola**, Senior Lecturer and Faculty EDI Lead at Oxford Brookes Business School, and Project Lead for Women and University Spinouts in Nigeria. She is joined by:



Yinka Makinde, Director of Digital Workforce and Professionalisation at NHSX.



Georgina Ayoola, CEO and Technical Director of Wavelength Solutions and Wavepalm Tech Solutions.

Tell us about your journeys...

Gina: I opened one engineering company in Kenya, and another in Nigeria. My initiative, the Wavepalm Academy, lets industry professionals mentor engineering students, many of whom have since joined large companies. Soon, I will also launch my next application Wavetelemedicine.

Yinka: I worked in digital health for 17 years, before joining NHSX as Head of Innovation in early 2020. I led innovative projects, such as remote monitoring apps to care for patients virtually, which certainly became relevant during the pandemic! Now, as Director of the Digital Workforce, I help develop the NHS to better embrace digital technology. I achieve this through workforce planning – attracting, and keeping, specialist skillsets from other sectors.

What challenges – both general and specific – have you faced as black woman innovators?

Gina: As an electronic engineering student doing the milk rounds, I was accepted by every place I applied to. But I constantly found that, to be taken seriously by *anyone*, I had to be twice as good as my male colleagues. Several believed that the course wasn't for women, and had no bones about telling me! After graduating, I was the only woman performing my role at Sony – a role that involved training junior staff, who would then get paid more than me!

In my first digital electronics lecture, the Lecturer pointed at me and asked, 'why are you here?' Shocked, I managed to reply, 'the reason why you're here.' I cried after that lecture, but worked so hard in recompense... and came top in my Practicals. Believing in children, however young, will stick with

them and give them confidence. My dad's championing left a lasting mark on me – even if he initially wanted me to be a doctor!

Bureaucracy can be the death of innovation. I started Wavetelemedicine during the pandemic, from an experience when I tried to call the emergency services and couldn't get through! There were so many roadblocks however for getting the platform into the NHS. At one point, I essentially begged my MP to just use the damn thing! In Africa, however, there is far greater scope for rapid deployment. I plan to launch it in Nigeria before March.

Yinka: Fortunately, I don't have many *major* stories of discrimination in my regular career. My greatest barrier as an entrepreneur was securing capital. In 2015 I secured the odd piece of funding, but not the quantum needed to keep my first business alive. Even then, women entrepreneurs in tech were few and far between, let alone women of colour. Progress is happening, but women leading start-ups are still stereotyped as emotional, irrational, unfocused and risk-averse. In tech, perceptions of women are gradually improving, but less so for people of colour. Almost all algorithms in Artificial Intelligence, for example, are developed by teams of older, white programmers. When those algorithms determine key outcomes for patients, that isn't just a social issue – that is *dangerous*.

Are women less credible than male innovators?

Yinka: Standing in front of a (predominantly white male) investor panel is perhaps the acid test of how credible someone feels they are. Entrepreneurs *always* need funding from a third party, so how they viewed me was important. No-one was ever disrespectful to me, but they *perceived* me differently. Nobody put their money where their mouth was.

As entrepreneurs, how do you deal with failure?

Gina: Failure is a steppingstone. Every rejection letter I received spurred me to send out another 5 applications. At interview I presented so well that most people weren't overly concerned with my credentials. I would define failure as, at least, an opportunity to shoot again.

Yinka: The UK has a more negative cultural view of failure (particularly entrepreneurial) compared to America, where entrepreneurial failure is worn like a badge of honour. You can't learn unless you've failed, but it's healthy to let yourself grieve a failure. I still have that entrepreneurial 'ember' burning inside me, albeit tempered with hard-learned lessons. Currently, my role is an entrepreneurial one, but within a 'safe' organisation, giving me the best of both worlds.

Do women make better entrepreneurs than men?

Gina: The old adage about multitasking rings true. Many women juggling cooking, childminding and housekeeping on top of their actual jobs. Few men ever have to balance that many responsibilities! Women's entrepreneurial and managerial skills are honed all their lives.

Yinka: Is empathy another characteristic we have over men? The capacity to reflect and be less impulsive. And we work hard, because we've always had to. Not to knock male entrepreneurs at all, but they can't always understand that.

As Women, Does Showing Emotion Impair Our Roles as Leaders?

Yinka: I don't necessarily think emotion is a bad thing. Out of context, it can be a dirty word – hence the 'hysterical woman' cultural trope. But emotional intelligence is a valuable leadership trait. Tapping into emotion, if well-managed and channelled strategically, can even be an asset.

How are you upscaling/empowering the next generation?

Gina: Catching children young is so important. Our schemes deliver empowering round table sessions with children, and I've also set up an aeronautics scheme at my daughter's school. A key point is to give children practical knowledge as well as academic. Anyone can write half-decent code, for instance,

but not everyone can design a decent or practical algorithm. Understanding the context of what you're doing is better than flying blind.

Yinka: I informally mentor women of colour, and am part of the SHURI Network, focused on women of colour in tech. NHSX, as a whole, is championing diversity through steering groups, working groups and driving forward initiatives. By making recruitment panels more reflective and unbiased we are attracting more diverse talents. My job is to facilitate that across the entire NHS tech space.

What would you say to policymakers?

Gina: Merely including women isn't enough; *empowering* them is crucial. Schools must empower girls *before* university or even A Levels, making viable STEM resources available early on. I did A Levels but with better advice I may have opted for BTEC, to bolster my practical knowledge over the theoretical.

Yinka: The National Apprenticeships Levy is sorely underused, which needs to change. Apprenticeships can 'hook' children before they start thinking about careers.

What have been the most satisfying or successful moments of being innovators?

Gina: For me, the most meaningful moments have been empowering the next generation, knowing that other young girls like me will go on to walk the path I've taken.

Yinka: The knowledge that my work is going to make meaningful change, and shape the future, is what satisfies me most.

The Conversation is a seminar series by the OBU Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Research, Innovation & Knowledge Exchange Network (EDIN)