Fact sheet 2: Intersectionality

This fact sheet is adapted from Our Watch Practice Guidance: Equality and respect for all women — an intersectional approach[>] (pages 4 and 5).

In order to achieve equality and respect for all women, gender inequality cannot be seen as separate from other forms of discrimination and disadvantage that women face.

Gender inequality is not experienced in the same way by all women (or men). While gender needs to remain at the centre of efforts to prevent violence against women, to achieve equality and respect for all women, gender inequality must be addressed concurrently with other forms of discrimination and disadvantage such as racism, colonisation, ableism, homophobia and religious discrimination.

It is important that staff leading workplace equality and respect initiatives understand intersectionality, in order to focus their efforts and tailor work accordingly.

What is intersectionality?

Gender inequality is not experienced the same way by all women, nor expressed the same way in all contexts. For example, an Anglo-Australian able-bodied woman is likely to have a vastly different experience of sexism in the workplace than a recently arrived refugee or a woman living with a disability.

To achieve equality and respect for all women, gender inequality cannot be seen as separate from other forms of discrimination and disadvantage that women face. Everyone's identities, social positions and experiences are shaped not just by gender, but by a range of other social categories of difference, including Aboriginality, culture, race, ethnicity, faith, socio-economic status, ability, sexuality, gender identity, education, age, and migration status.

The consideration of how people experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage is referred to as 'intersectionality'.

Where did the concept of 'intersectionality' come from?

The concept of intersectionality was developed by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In developing 'intersectionality' as a concept, Crenshaw cited a court case where a group of African-American women argued that a manufacturing company had refused to hire them on the basis on their race and gender. However, the court ruled that the company was not guilty of discriminatory hiring practices based on race, because they had hired African-American men to work on the factory floor.

The court also ruled that the company had not discriminated on the basis of gender, as they hired white women for office-based roles. What the court failed to consider was the intersection of race and gender and the compound discrimination faced by African-American women.

The outcome of this court case illustrates how looking at diversity through only one lens (in this case either gender or race) can obscure instances where discrimination against particular groups of women exists. It also highlights how some workplace policies, though they may appear to promote diversity, can fail to be inclusive of all women or all employees.

How intersectionality complements work to promote diversity and inclusion

Many workplaces are already undertaking important work in promoting diversity and inclusion through their policies. As highlighted by the manufacturing company example above, applying an intersectional approach is different from promoting diversity, because it considers more than one form of privilege and/or discrimination at the same time.

An intersectional approach to workplace equality and respect firstly requires that a diversity of employees and stakeholders are considered in your initiatives. It then also requires that initiatives consider the intersection of different forms of discrimination that might affect groups of people in the workplace. For example, your workplace diversity policy might aim to increase the number of women in leadership, or it might seek to create a work culture where all LGBTIQ+ identifying employees feel safe and valued at work. An intersectional approach addresses both the impact of gender alongside other forms of identity and social status, such as cultural background, and can consider whether women whose second language is English face structural or cultural barriers in the workplace.