5 ways to apply intersectionality to gender equality planning and action in the workplace

The State of Victoria's Gender Equality Act 2020 requires public sector organisations to develop intersectional strategies and measures that consider how employees' experiences of gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination. These include Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, nationality, visa status, sexuality and gender identity, and religion.

Intersectionality is a way of seeing the dynamics and impacts of social and economic inequality across society.

The core idea of intersectionality is that privileges or (dis)advantages are never the result of one single factor such as race, class or gender. Instead, they are a result of how we are seen, positioned and (de)valued in relation to the way society is structured and governed (Chen 2017; Crenshaw 1989, 1990; Nasr 2020).

In the context of gender equality in the workplace, intersectionality reminds us that gender is not experienced in the same way by everyone. For example, our age, gender identity, life stage, ability, sexuality, indigeneity, race, ethnicity, class, religious beliefs, family, geographical location and profession can all change our perceptions of gender, as well as the way our gender is perceived and treated within the workplace.

With the Gender Equality Act 2020 coming into effect in March 2021 comes a unique opportunity for organisations across the state to commit to intersectional planning and action for gender equality in the workplace from the get-go.

This resource will explore the following five best-practice strategies for applying intersectionality to planning and action on gender equality in the workplace:

1. Disaggregate data collection and analysis, including meaningful consultation
2. Take action based on meaningful consultation, data collection and analysis
3. Build employee capacity based on identified needs
4. Promote marginalised women's leadership
5. Respond to violence within (and outside) the workplace

1 Disaggregate data collection and analysis, including meaningful consultation

Intersectionality recognises that each of our lives is shaped by many factors interacting together and that these can influence our experiences and opportunities in the workplace. It goes beyond explanations that use single categories to describe people or issues, and instead identifies systems of power and privilege that shape people's experiences. When we think in this way, we can better understand how gender inequality is experienced by different people and design responsive solutions.

For example, an aged care organisation has identified through disaggregated data collection on employee experience that some migrant employees on insecure visas do not have the same access to COVID-19 workplace protections that employees with citizenship and permanent residency have.

In this case, visa status would be a category of power and privilege. In response, the organisation could implement specific COVID-19 supports for employees disadvantaged by their visa status, alongside working with relevant local organisations to publicly advocate for policy reform, for example, through campaigns, public talks, and open letters.

Key considerations for data collection and analysis:

- Collect demographic and experience data at all levels of the employee life cycle: attraction, recruitment, onboarding, developing, retention, and offboarding

- Disaggregate and analyse demographic and experience data in relation to Aboriginality, age, disability, race, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, and other relevant social categories

- Conduct meaningful consultation that centres marginalised voices (e.g. the experiences and voices of migrant and refugee women within your workplace) prior to and throughout the design of gender equality action plans

- Identify the systems of power and privilege that shape different employees' experiences and opportunities in the workplace

- Ensure representation of marginalised people, such as migrant and refugee women, in decision-making positions in senior leadership, committees, and boards

- Build in accountability and transparency measures for disaggregated data sharing, particularly for pay and contract equity and the composition of senior management teams

2 Take action based on meaningful consultation, data collection and analysis

It is often the case that commitment to gender and workplace equality is a top-down process, whereby senior leadership recognise its importance or its legislative necessity, then reactively produce plans and actions to express this commitment.

While senior leadership play a significant role in resourcing and promoting gender and workplace equality, taking a solely top-down approach can lead to resistance, backlash or, at the very least, a disconnection between priorities at the senior level and the lower levels of the organisation.

It is imperative that senior leadership embrace an intersectional bottom-up approach when planning and taking action on gender equality in the workplace.

This means the direction and priorities of gender and workplace equality plans and actions taken by senior leadership should largely be informed and decided in partnership with employees (particularly those that are most marginalised) and their experiences of workplace barriers and opportunities.

Planning and taking action to transform the identified systems of power and privilege that shape different employees' experiences and opportunities in your workplace could include workplace-specific responses (e.g. implementing inclusive, equitable processes across the employee life cycle: attraction, recruitment, onboarding, developing, retention, and offboarding) or public advocacy with partner organisations (e.g. open letters and public talks on the impact of visa restrictions on migrant women employees in the aged care sector).

Key considerations for taking informed action:

- Designate a project team solely dedicated to implement and monitor your progress towards the gender equality plan

- Ensure representation of marginalised employees, such as migrant and refugee women, in senior management, boards and/or decision-making positions regarding gender and workplace equality planning and action, or co-design where possible

- Partner with relevant specialist organisations e.g. multicultural, ethno-specific and women's organisations to support your gender equality planning and action

- Design actions that can transform systems of power and privilege as identified through meaningful consultation, disaggregated data collection and analysis across the employee life cycle: attraction, recruitment, onboarding, developing, retention, and offboarding

- Include a plan for managing and responding to resistance and backlash, including capacity building for management and human resources departments. This is particularly important in smaller workplaces where risk of backlash towards marginalised people is higher

- Build in accountability and transparency measures in relation to progress in transforming systems of power and privilege within your workplace

3 Build employee capacity based on identified needs

The most common (and sometimes only) method that organisations implement to demonstrate commitment to gender equality in the workplace is mandatory diversity training.

Building employee capacity through strengths-based, skills-based training is certainly a necessary component of gender equality plans.

This training can help employees to identify and respond to their own relationships with power and privilege, as well as to build stronger healthier interpersonal dynamics in the workplace. However, it is important to, first, consider the purpose of training and second, to the tailor the training to the specific needs of your workplace. You can do this by analysing the demographic and experience data you have collected from your employees for trends or areas for improvement.

This means that sometimes popular 'go-to' forms of diversity training may not be effective (nor efficient) in meeting your workplace's needs.

Unconscious bias training is one such example where popularity is not a measure of effectiveness. Evidence shows that unconscious bias training can solidify existing attitudes and create backlash (Kulik et al 2000; Kowal et al 2013), that any behavioural change is short-term and unsustainable (Bezrukova et al 2016), and that it is the least effective form of diversity training (Kalov et al 2006).

In fact, any training, regardless of its effectiveness, provided as a standalone with a sole focus on individual attitudes and behaviour will not lead to the structural change needed to eliminate inequalities in the workplace (Noon 2018).

Key considerations for gender equality training:

- Clarify the purpose of training provision, measure its impact towards that purpose, and build accountability and transparency measures into the training scheme

- Ensure training is strengths-based and tailored to the specific needs of your workplace

- Develop an educational support pathway for individuals who require further support or are interested in further advocacy or leadership in this space

- Incorporate the provision of regular intersectional gender equality training into the organisational level gender equality plan

- Build capacity at management level for managing and responding to resistance or backlash

- Outsource training to specialist organisations e.g. multicultural, ethno-specific, and women's organisations where possible

- Ensure training is one action component in your broader gender equality plan

4 Promote marginalised women's leadership

Mentorships and sponsorships are a common response to gender inequality in the workplace, especially regarding the composition of management, senior leadership, and boards. Mentorships involve investing one-on-one time and resources into building the capacity of a woman, and with sponsorships, mentors use their power and influence to advocate on behalf of their mentee to ensure career advancement.

Intersectionality helps us to recognise that both mentorships and sponsorships do little to increase the power of marginalised women, such as migrant and refugee women, at the organisational level. These tools rely on and maintain existing systems of power and privilege that are at the core of workplace inequalities experienced by marginalised women. For example, systems that perpetuate notions of which women are considered as 'high-potential' and which women are not.

Instead, it is more useful to identify and transform the systems of power and privilege that advance or limit different people's opportunities and career advancement in the workplace. These can include local and federal government policies (e.g. temporary visa limitations), hierarchal top-down unrepresentative structures within the organisation (e.g. an executive committee consisting entirely of Anglo-Australian senior management having complete decision-making power over gender equality priorities), organisational systems and policies (e.g. inequitable access to flexible work arrangements and parental leave), and interpersonal practices (e.g. exclusive social activities like 'boys club' outings).

Each workplaces' transformations will look different, but could include implementing inclusive, equitable processes across the employee life cycle: attraction, recruitment, onboarding, developing, retention, and offboarding. For example, this could include recognising overseas qualifications in hiring and promotion processes and providing supportive work conditions for employees impacted by visa restrictions.

The benefits will extend beyond your workplace. Evidence shows that diverse leadership is critical for workplace equality, as well as equality in society at large (Australian Human Rights Commission 2016).

Key considerations for promoting marginalised women's leadership:

- Identify the systems, policies, and practices that advance or limit different people's career advancement (especially across the employee life cycle), and work towards transforming them to be inclusive and equitable

- Centre and promote migrant and refugee women's and all marginalised women's voices and experiences

- Co-design pathways for professional development and career advancement with migrant and refugee women within the workplace

- Ensure all sponsorship or mentorship programmes are implemented alongside, and not in replacement of, transformations of systems of power and privilege

5 Respond to violence within (and outside) the workplace

We know that gender inequality is inextricably linked to violence against women, and that workplaces are a key primary prevention setting.

This recognition has led to zero-tolerance to discrimination, sexual harassment and/or bullying in the workplace as a common organisational slogan.

However, it is not often clear what zero-tolerance means in practice, especially when it comes to different kinds of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. This confusion can lead to mistakes being made, certain complaints being minimised or ignored, and potentially perpetuating further harm towards people who have experienced discrimination, sexual harassment and/or bullying.

Commitment to gender and workplace equality, and prevention of violence against women, is thus demonstrated in how your workplace responds to informal and formal complaints of discrimination, sexual harassment and/or bullying, as well as disclosures of family and sexual violence.

Key considerations to strengthen workplace response:

- Ensure there are robust complainant-centred informal and formal procedures for responding to discrimination, sexual harassment and/or bullying within the workplace

- Ensure robust survivor-centred referral and support pathways for employees experiencing family or sexual violence

- Provide training to managers and relevant parties (such as human resource departments) to build capacity in response procedures using a trauma-informed and culturally safe approach, including role-play exercises where managers simulate and practice these procedures

- Introduce regular bystander training to build employee awareness of the organisation's response procedures and their own capacity to recognise and intervene safely when they witness discriminatory attitudes or behaviours, such as racist/ableist/sexist jokes and gendered, racialised stereotypes

- Outsource training to specialist family and sexual violence organisations, as this is highly specialist work that requires trauma-informed culturally safe experts leading it

- Create a non-judgemental space for managers and employees alike to actively reflect on and address their own relationships to power and privilege

- Ensure that employees who may already be marginalised in the workplace are not solely responsible for the emotional labour of this transformative work

Further Resources

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About us

Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH) is a national, community-based organisation led by and for women from migrant and refugee communities. MCWH works together with migrant women, community organisations, health practitioners, employers and governments to build and share knowledge, achieve equity and improve health and wellbeing for migrant and refugee women and their communities.

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As migrants to this country, we benefit from the ongoing colonisation of the land now called Australia and have a shared responsibility to acknowledge the harm done to its first people and work towards respect and recognition. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are leaders in preventing the disproportionate levels of violence enacted against them, their children and their families.

We also celebrate that intersectional theory has largely emerged from Black and Indigenous women's activism around the world.

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