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## **ways intersectionality helps us to understand gender inequality in the workplace**

With the Gender Equality Act 2020 coming into effect on 31 March 2021 in Victoria, it is timely to consider how gender equality is understood within the Act, and what it means for the Victorian public sector, local councils, and universities.

The Gender Equality Act 2020 takes an intersectional approach to gender equality in the workplace.

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).

In other words, the Gender Equality Act 2020 recognises that gender inequality is made worse by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination. The Act requires that workplace gender audits collect disaggregated data in relation to Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, nationality, visa status, sexuality and gender identity, and religion, if available.

**So, how does intersectionality help us to understand gender inequality in the workplace?**

# 1

## It shows gender is not experienced in the same way by everyone

Often gender inequality is represented as a matter of men versus women. This is particularly visible in the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (WGE Act)'s focus on the gender pay gap between working men and working women in every industry and job type.

However, people come from all walks of life: different racial, ethnic or class backgrounds, visa status, nationality, religion, sexuality, gender identity, and age... and intersectionality helps to explain how these can influence the way people are valued and treated in the workplace.

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a pioneering scholar and writer on civil rights, critical race theory, and Black feminist legal theory. In her 1989 paper, "Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory And Antiracist Politics", Crenshaw refers to a court case where Black women were disproportionately let go by General Motors during a recession under a 'last in, first out' policy.

The company was not found to be discriminating against these Black women because white women and Black men remained employed. Crenshaw argues that by separating gender from race and treating Black women as simply women or Black, the courts ignored the specific challenges that Black women face as a group.

As another example, recent research found that Asian-Australians experience high levels of discrimination in the workplace (see Biddle, Gray, Herz & Lo 2019). Similar to the glass ceiling metaphor referring to the barriers experienced by women in the workplace, the 'bamboo ceiling' accounts for the barriers (e.g. racialised and gendered stereotyping) that impede Asian-Australians' career advancement or attainment of leadership roles within the workplace.

A one-size-fits-all approach to gender equality won't work for everybody, as it doesn't account for the barriers experienced by different people.

Intersectionality recognises that people's experiences of gender inequality can look very different. It therefore promotes an inclusive approach to gender equality initiatives, which ensures that everyone is treated equitably in the workplace regardless of their gender and other attributes. This includes men, women and gender diverse people.

# 2

## It emphasises the systems of power and privilege that shape how gender is experienced by different people

When organisations promote gender equality, there tends to be a focus on responding at the individual level.

This means gender equality initiatives often seek to influence employees' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that contribute to gender inequality, mainly through developing toolkits, promotional material and a variety of training modules.

While supporting individual employees to practice gender equality is necessary, it must be complemented by transforming the systems of power and privilege that shape different people's experiences of gender inequality, and their access to rights, resources and opportunities in the workplace.

Systems of power and privilege refers to the unequal distribution of wealth and power in society that arise from the structural forces of colonialism, institutional racism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

For example, migrant women's experiences of being stereotyped as submissive and thus unfit for leadership positions shows an interplay between the individual and the structural.

In part, such positioning is driven by racist and sexist attitudes at the societal and individual level, which encourage disrespect towards women and devalue migrant and refugee women. It is also driven by workplace policies that minimise women's opportunities for decision-making and leadership e.g. casual contracts without flexibility or parental leave, migration policies that limit migrant women's work opportunities, and industry regulations that allow employers to exploit migrants and refugees on certain visas.

Intersectionality emphasises that the individual and structural forces shaping gender inequality are very much interconnected, reinforcing and informing each other, and therefore must both be addressed within gender equality initiatives in the workplace.

# 3

## It accommodates the complexity of people's understanding and experiences

Workplaces are dynamic places. Intersectionality accommodates that complexity.

It shows that people can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously, depending on the specific context or situation.

It also shows that there is no fixed hierarchy of disadvantage, and that people's experiences and understanding of how their lives are impacted by power or privilege varies.

Therefore, intersectionality can help your organisation to recognise the complex and diverse relationships people have with power and privilege and move away from making assumptions or reinforcing stereotypes.



# 4

## It grounds the data informing gender equality initiatives in people's lived realities

Measuring and tracking gender data is a popular component of gender equality initiatives. We often hear of statistics relating to pay equity between men and women and the proportion of women in senior management or boards.

However, these statistics give a skewed representation of workplace inequalities, as they fail to account for the inequalities experienced by a range of men, women and gender diverse people.

For example, WGEA currently only disaggregates collected data to compare the pay of men and women across industry and occupation types. WGEA's analysis does not, however, account for other internationally recognised pay inequalities experienced by people from indigenous, LGBTQIA+ and/or migrant backgrounds and people with disabilities (Institute for Gender & Economy 2019).

**Skewed data skews gender equality initiatives.**

More substantial disaggregated data, on the other hand, can allow your organisation to understand how gender inequality is experienced by different people, to be responsive to and measure their progress on improving these inequalities.

The Gender Equality Act requires that gender impact assessments collect disaggregated data in relation to Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, and sexual orientation, if practical (and arguably it always is). Visa status is also an important variable too.

# 5

## It strengthens the reach of gender equality initiatives

It may seem intuitive to focus solely on gender when designing your organisation's gender equality initiatives. However, intersectionality can help your organisation recognise that gender is experienced differently by everyone because of many attributes and structural forces.

With this understanding, your organisation can strengthen the reach of its gender equality initiatives by identifying and responding to the unique experiences of your employees, and the systems of power and privilege that shape them.

For example, a gender-only approach to increasing the representation of women in senior management positions is likely to benefit Anglo-Australian women more than migrant and refugee women, due to social and visa status, racialised and gendered stereotypes about leadership capacity, and exclusion of overseas qualifications and experience.

Applying intersectionality would instead lead your organisation to consider and respond to the specific relationships, policies and processes that privilege or disadvantage different women's access to leadership opportunities, professional development, and career advancement in your organisation.

Intersectionality can help your organisation to design gender equality initiatives that reach more employees, more effectively.



## 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.