



SHIFTING BEYOND A GENDER-ONLY APPROACH

The Case For Intersectionality



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Introduction

When companies reach out to us to provide support for their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, the first thing they often say is “we need to hire more women” or “we need more Black people on our leadership team.” While this is good, we are all so much more than social constructs of race and gender, and our understanding of DEI needs to encompass so much more than these singular aspects of our identity.

Often, the first step organizations take on their journey is to launch an engagement or DEI survey to help quantify the “problem” they believe they’re experiencing. They’ll likely have a series of questions measuring employee sentiments – for example, their feelings of inclusion, support, fairness, and commitment. Increasingly, they’ll also have a set of demographic questions to help them understand the composition of their workforce (i.e. their diversity numbers). Once they’ve collected their data, they’ll run a report comparing men to women, and identify how “women” are feeling across a range of sentiment statements.

Organizations are almost always able to tell us how women are faring inside the organization, but they are often unable to tell us how a woman who is also racialized and a member of the LGBTQ2+ community is feeling. Let’s call her Lara.

We witness this often as many organizations do not use an intersectional approach with their DEI-related data analysis, meaning they rarely look beyond gender.

Or, if they have the intention of taking an intersectional approach, they'll quickly find that the engagement platform they use needs to hide or remove the data of groups with small sample sizes (because of data privacy constraints). This means that if Lara is the only racialized woman who is also a member of the LGBTQ2+ community within the organization, her data will be hidden as it risks linking Lara to the set of statements and therefore identifying her survey responses and putting Lara at risk. Additionally, Lara's data will be aggregated, or bunched, with the rest of the groups such as women, racialized people, and members of the LGBTQ2+ community, but her data, and therefore her story, is unlikely to be heard by decision-makers. In fact, leadership may never be able to learn how to best support her.

It is a vicious cycle – honest attempts to remedy inequities can actually worsen them.

Since Lara is a part of such a small group, her narratives get excluded from the design process, which is meant to help people like her in the first place. The shortfalls of employee engagement data collection is one of the most damaging ways that the “gender-only” approach fails to support all women.

Organizations often unintentionally exclude those who have multiple and intersecting identities. There is a real need to advance women in the workplace but sometimes, even the most well-intentioned organizations can get it wrong. We understand and we believe this can be changed.

In this resource, we want to address some common misconceptions about implementing DEI through a “gender-only” approach, and how you can avoid these pitfalls.

Any time we refer to "women," we mean all people who identify as such. This includes, but is not limited to, trans women, non-binary women, femmes, those who are feminine of centre, or those who identify as a member of the Sisterhood generally.

WHY A “GENDER-ONLY” APPROACH DOESN'T WORK

There are common experiences that Lara and other women face in the workplace like anti-feminine microaggressions, unacknowledged emotional labour, judgement about physical appearances, sexual harassment, and being underestimated, undervalued, or overlooked. In this respect, women suffer under the same conditions of the patriarchal system – a system that still prioritizes men.

Patriarchy is not the fault of any one man or even a group of men. It is a system that many societies have been founded upon in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control of property.

Even though women are all oppressed under the patriarchal system, women are still not all the same. Women can possess many more identities than their gender that render their experiences in the workplace unique.

● RESOURCE

To learn more about patriarchy, we recommend watching [What Is the Patriarchy? | Feminist Fridays](#).

Who Does The “Gender-Only” Approach Actually Serve?

Take a moment and picture a successful business woman in your mind.

If you're in North America, there is a chance the first image that came to mind was of a white woman.

This is quite common. We are conditioned by media and products to think of whiteness as the default. When we go shopping for bandaids, they are mostly offered in pale shades even though they are meant to blend in with the user's skin tone. When we use pencil crayons, the one named “Nude” is a pale colour that barely shows up on the paper. This is a defining characteristic of a white supremacist society, a society which prioritizes white people to people of other races. Even though a white person may not believe that white people should be prioritized over other races, they still benefit from white supremacy. This is because white supremacy is a political or socio-economic system, in which white people enjoy a privilege over other racial groups on both a collective and individual level.

When you pictured that woman from before, odds are that the woman you imagined was also cisgender, heterosexual, and non-disabled.

This is because in addition to patriarchy and white supremacy, we are also living within a heteronormative system that presumes being heterosexual and cisgender as the default or the norm. Additionally, we live under an ableist system that discriminates in favour of non-disabled people (e.g. buildings often add accessibility ramps to their structures as an afterthought instead of building them into the architecture from the start).

This default thinking is why strategies meant to help “women” tend to support white, heterosexual, cisgender, non-disabled women. Meanwhile, they are unable to support LGBTQ2+ women, disabled women, racialized women, Indigenous women, etc.

Initiatives meant to help women tend to devote proportionately less attention and resources to constituents with multiple marginalized identities, like Lara, who may require additional resources beyond gender-based initiatives. It’s as if gender-only approaches want to help the “default” women first—those whose only marginalized identity is their gender—and then start thinking about all the other women after “default” women have reached equality. What results is that only one type of woman advances in an organization while all other women tend to be left behind.

For example, taking measures to hire more women on a board may be more relevant for white, cisgender women, who are already established, than it is for women who have been denied entering such spaces. For many other women, simply entering a profession, industry, or organization can be a great challenge, let alone sitting on a board. What might a person like Lara, who is a woman of colour and a member of the LGBTQ2+ community, need in order to be able to be a frontrunner for a board seat? We would love to know, but unfortunately we won’t if her data is masked due to the small sample size of her intersectional identity.

We must be thoughtful about how organizational practices affect women of all experiences and identities, not just the women who are most visible in our society.

THE CASE FOR AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

What can we do about this? The standard for tackling DEI issues is to adopt an “intersectional” approach.

“Intersectionality” is the theory of how the overlap of various social identities, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and beyond, contributes to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual.

RESOURCES

Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with coining the term "intersectionality" 30 years ago.

[KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW'S PAPER](#)

For those who are new to the concept of intersectionality, we recommend watching Kimberlé Crenshaw's TED Talk.

[KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW'S TED TALK](#)

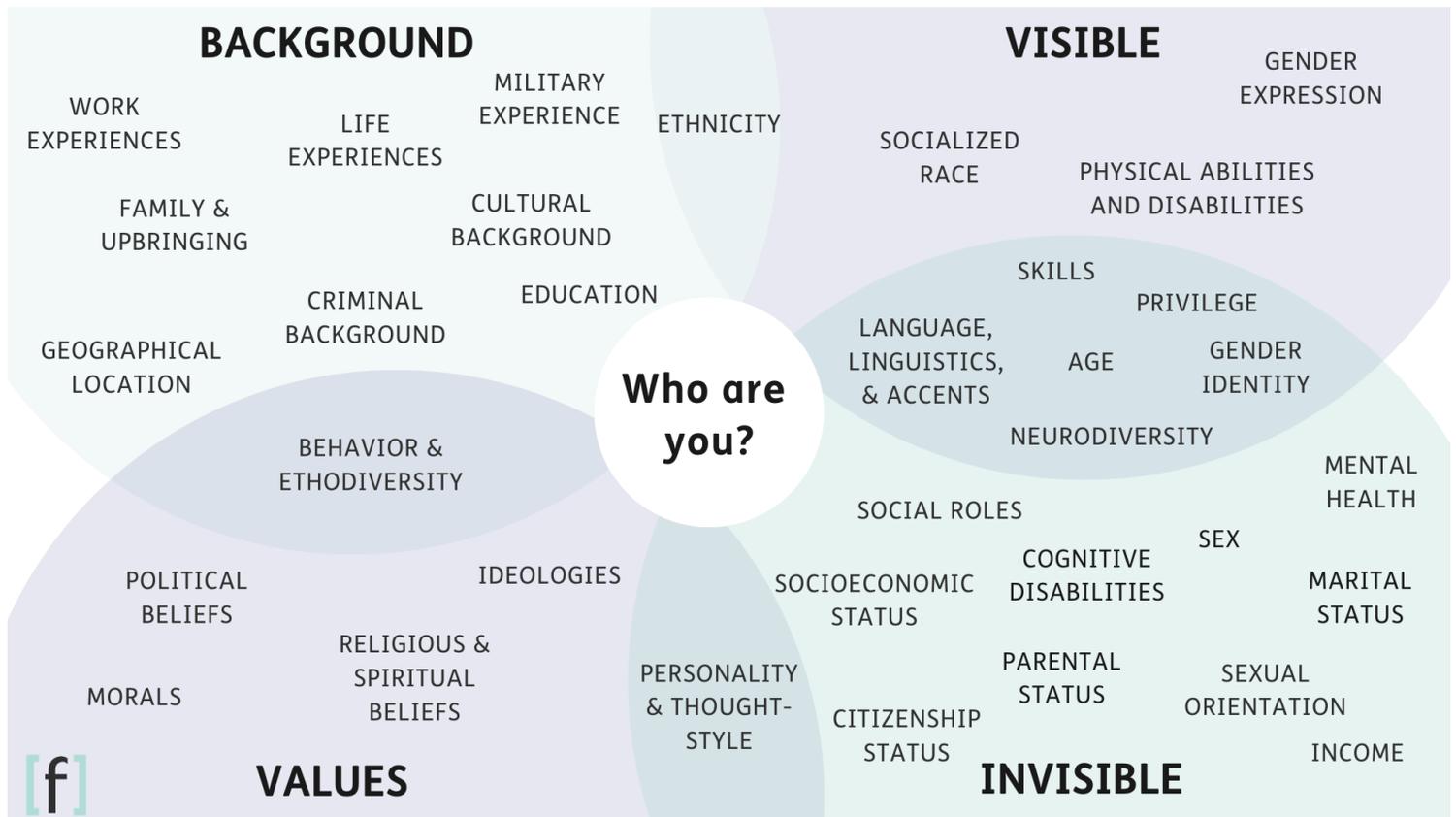
For a fun analogy to explain intersectionality, check out this video that links intersectionality to pizza.

[INTERSECTIONALITY VIDEO](#)

Intersectionality Diagram

No person has a single discrete identity, just as how it would be inaccurate to say Lara is only a woman, or only a racialized person, or only LGBTQ2+. Everyone has a culmination of multiple identities that makes them who they are.

Engage this diagram and consider all of the identities that you possess! We suspect you'll find more than one.



Intersectionality in Action

► Pairing Data with Stories

With an intersectional approach, we benefit from the immense value of input from someone like Lara as not only a woman, but also as a person with multiple and overlapping identities. It is important to understand how engagement platforms manage data privacy and anonymous responses to mitigate the risks of not being able to report on various intersections. Lara's sentiments and experiences are often masked by the platform for being too small of a sample size. This means that it is important to talk to people like Lara directly to hear her story. But before that, it's vital to create a space where employees feel a sense of psychological safety and can share their experiences. It is as important as collecting employee engagement survey data in the first place.

Stories breathe colour and texture into the data and help us truly understand people. Stories move us to craft better solutions for the people involved.

► Shifting Beyond Maternity + Paternity Leave

For a practical example of intersectionality in action, consider maternity leave policies. Many organizations provide maternity leave for expecting mothers, which is great and beneficial for many cisgender women. But these policies are often only available for biological mothers. Meanwhile, LGBTQ+ women or women who can't have biological children who may be adopting or using a surrogate are excluded.

It is important to broaden the policy for something such as parental leave (to also encourage men as full and active parents as well), or perhaps "care leave."

This more general policy includes anyone who requires time away to care for loved ones, whether it's a newborn baby, a foster child, or aging parents. This is a more inclusive model that ensures people from all kinds of family structures are able to take time off.

► Re-Thinking Holiday and Vacation Policies

Another way that intersectionality can be adopted in the workplace is to have a more flexible vacation policy. Ensure that people have the option to take time off for the celebrations that are relevant to them, while choosing not to take time off for those that aren't. While it is the norm for Christmas to be a company-wide holiday, many people don't celebrate that day.

Instead, a company could offer a paid-holiday leave calendar for the days that are relevant to the individual.

That way, someone who doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving can still come to work but might want to take Chinese New Year off instead. The benefit of this is better accommodations for a diverse group of employees, while guaranteeing there will be people available to work all year round.

► Debunking Myths

Feminism and intersectionality are sometimes conflated with a kind of reverse discrimination that negates men's lived experiences. It is important to recognize that men's experiences are also impacted by intersections and social pressures in different ways that have real consequences. "Many fear that focusing on women's rights means neglecting men's problems, such as the high male suicide rate. Not so. I urge sceptics to take any issue that particularly affects men. It is often closely connected to the sort of outdated gender stereotypes that feminists are committed to tackling" (The Economist).

Intersectionality is an expansive way of thinking that draws everyone into a more thoughtful dialogue on identity, power, and privilege at a systemic level.

CONCLUSION

If you're an organization and you're keen to find ways to better support women, remember that a gender-only approach is unlikely to fulfill the needs of all women.

An organization must take into consideration how women's identities interact in a range of ways to form unique experiences of inequity and social exclusion.

Using this approach, organizations design systems that help each individual woman thrive. By keeping in mind the things we've discussed here or by reaching out to us to learn more, you can become better equipped to create solutions and organizational cultures that help all women, not just some.

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