



## WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?



GUIDE FOR INTERSECTIONAL MOVEMENT BUILDING  
FROM  
INCLUSIVE LEADERS GROUP CONSULTING PRACTICE

## What is Intersectionality?

INTERSECTIONALITY<sup>1</sup> can sound like a mouthful. But at its most basic, intersectionality recognizes and describes the way that different parts of our identities "intersect" and "overlap" to create who we fully are and how we move through and experience the world. In the context of social justice, intersectionality focuses on our social identities like race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, citizenship, nationality, and age, etc.

"I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression," wrote Black feminist poet Audre Lorde. Lorde's imprint on intersectionality is unmistakable. Most importantly, Lorde offers a liberatory and intersectional framework to social justice activism. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1pNsLsHsfs>

From the perspective of law<sup>2</sup>, it was civil rights attorney Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw who developed and applied the theory of intersectionality, when she considered how the law responds to issues that include gender and race discrimination. She noted that the law looks at gender and race separately, and consequently Black women and other women of color, experiencing overlapping forms of discrimination, may be left without adequate recourse.

<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination>

[https://6edeb695-d349-4697-a542-e06327f63c1a.filesusr.com/ugd/e396c1\\_2c065f2cc55a46999f3a086d9d313b5b.pdf](https://6edeb695-d349-4697-a542-e06327f63c1a.filesusr.com/ugd/e396c1_2c065f2cc55a46999f3a086d9d313b5b.pdf)



Intersectionality has become a buzzword, yet many times it is misused or overstated without intentional practice or application. As Crenshaw shares, "when racial justice doesn't have a critique of patriarchy and homophobia, the particular way that racism is experienced and exacerbated by heterosexism, classism etc., falls outside of our political organizing. It means that significant numbers of people in our communities aren't being served by social justice frames because they don't address the particular ways that they're experiencing discrimination."

## 5 ways intersectionality affects workplace diversity and inclusion<sup>3</sup>

Company diversity and inclusion programs that do not take intersectionality into account risk overlooking these experiences, which include:

### 1. Greater wage inequality

In 2020, while white women in the U.S. earn 81 cents for every dollar a white man earns; the same figure for American Indian, Alaska Native, Black, African American, and Hispanic women is 75 cents.

<https://www.payscale.com/data/gender-pay-gap>

Read another way, while white women will reach gender parity with men in the U.S. in 2059, the data shows that for Black women this date is 2130, and 2224 for Hispanic women.

Wage inequality is also seen for people with disabilities in the workplace, and increases with intersectionality: in the UK, men with disabilities from the Bangladeshi community experience a pay gap of 56% (compared with non-disabled white British men)

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/research-report-107-the-disability-pay-gap.pdf>



### 2. Lack of professional development

Research shows that Black women have less access to training, have received less mentorship and sponsorship, and have less frequent opportunities to interact with senior leaders. These all result in fewer opportunities to develop their careers, compared to white women. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-pay-gap-is-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-for-black-women-300905708.html>

As a result, while only 21% of C-suite leaders in the US are women, only 4% are women of color, and only 1% are Black women.

[https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women\\_in\\_the\\_Workplace\\_2019.pdf](https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2019.pdf)

When San Francisco Bay Area technology companies implemented diversity programs, the representation of white women in management significantly improved, exceeding their representation as employees.

But the same was not true for any racial minority women group, and race played a more significant role than gender in breaking the glass ceiling. A focus on gender diversity had reduced the gap between men and women but did not improve the chances for Asian women to be promoted into leadership roles.

### 3. Hiring discrimination and inequities in unemployment

Intersectionality also affects who is in the job market, and who is hired.

An experimental study in Belgium found a 'double jeopardy' problem for Maghreb/ Arab women applying for high-cognitive demanding jobs. Their resumé were overlooked by HR professionals even though they were as highly qualified for the roles as native/Belgian applicants. <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2019-71048-001.html>



People with disabilities, especially those from underrepresented groups, are overrepresented in the ranks of the unemployed: Data from the 2018 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium showed only 28.6% of US African Americans with disabilities aged 18-64 had a job, compared to 73.7% of African Americans without disabilities. <https://www.respectability.org/2019/02/african-americans-jobs-2018/>



More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black women in the US have been nearly twice as likely as white men to report that they'd either been laid off, furloughed, or had their hours and/or pay reduced.

[https://media.sgff.io/sgff\\_r1eHetbDYb/2020-05-18/1589844115711/the-coronavirus-is-a-financial-crisis-for-women\\_2.pdf](https://media.sgff.io/sgff_r1eHetbDYb/2020-05-18/1589844115711/the-coronavirus-is-a-financial-crisis-for-women_2.pdf)

Immigrant women in Canada, and those from racial minorities, are more likely than any other group to be either unemployed or underemployed in jobs that do not reflect their education or experience.

<https://www.gendereconomy.org/intersectionality-and-workplace-gender-equity/>

#### 4. Increased sexual harassment

Research from the UK has shown that LGBTQI+ people's experience of sexual harassment and assault at work varied significantly depending on their ethnicity.

More than half of lesbian, bisexual and trans Black and minority ethnic women (54%) reported unwanted touching compared to around one third of white women (31%).

LGBTQI+ women with disabilities reported significantly higher levels of sexual harassment than both men with disabilities and non-disabled men and women.

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/sexual-harassment-lgbt-people-workplace?page=8>

Black women were found to be much more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace than their white peers, in a US study looking at data from 1997 to 2016.

“The shift from sexual harassment of white women to African-American women indicates that harassers are conscious of power relationships and choose to target more vulnerable women in their workplaces,” the authors wrote.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/gwao.12394>



## 5. Higher turnover rates

It's bad news for employers, too, as employees who face discrimination linked to intersectionality are more likely to leave the organization.

People of colour who experienced microaggressions in the workplace were more likely to quit: more than a third (35%) of Black professionals intended to quit within two years compared with 27% of white professionals, with rates slightly higher for Black women (36%) than Black men (33%).

<https://www.catalyst.org/research/turnover-and-retention>

This could be due to the “emotional tax” Black women bear at work, where the inequalities they face lead to an environment in which they are always “on guard to protect against bias, discrimination and unfair treatment”, according to nonprofit Catalyst.

<https://www.catalyst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/emotionaltax.pdf>

In general, women of colour (24%) are more likely than men of colour (11%) to be on guard because they expect both gender and racial bias.

### What companies can do to address intersectionality

Today, most diversity and inclusion efforts include equity as a dimension, giving everyone equal opportunities to develop and considering their background and the unique challenges they face. To make sure no one is left out, companies need to collect and analyze data on pay and employee engagement, separating out variables of race, gender, sexual orientation, or physical ability.

Targets for diversity and inclusion programs must include gender representation but also racial inclusion at different levels of the organization, and any unconscious bias training must be designed with intersectionality in mind. Companies should be willing to try new approaches if the usual initiatives do not result in people with intersectionality of lived experiences receiving equal access to opportunities for pay, recognition, and advancement, measures that can only be assessed through disaggregated data.

Addressing intersectionality starts from the top. CEOs and senior executives need to acknowledge their unconscious bias, which makes talent at the intersections at times invisible to them, and publicly state their intention to create an inclusive workplace, particularly for people at the intersections of unique identities.

### Let's Talk About Building Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion at Your Organization.

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<https://www.inclusiveleadersgroup.com/solutions/consulting/>

### Source

1. Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit 2020
2. Racial Equity Tools 2020
3. World Economic Forum 2020