



What Is Intersectionality?

[Intersectionality](#) is a framework for understanding how social identities—such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and gender identity—overlap with one another and with systems of power that oppress and advantage people in the workplace and broader community.¹

What Intersectionality Is Not

Intersectionality is not a code word for diversity. It is a framework for understanding different people's varying experiences in the world.

Intersectionality is not about *adding* one aspect of identity to another.² It is about how people with overlapping identities experience systems of power.

Intersectionality is not a replacement for [anti-racist education](#) or thought. Intersectionality complements anti-racist, feminist, and other perspectives that promote equity and inclusion.

Intersectionality is not solely an American phenomenon. It is a perspective that can be applied to people and institutions around the world.³

Why Is it Important to Consider Intersectionality in the Workplace?

For each of us, our various identities impact our daily lives, affecting how we perceive the world and how the world perceives us. When we look at how our identities intersect, we see the unique lived experiences—of ourselves and others—through the lens of **privilege, oppression, power, and marginalization**. Who has power? Who gets the benefit of the doubt? Who doesn't? Who is automatically included in groups? Who isn't? How do you "show up" to other people? What do you do to control how others perceive you? What parts of your identity help you fit in? What parts of your identity make you stand out? The answers to all these questions are rooted in intersectionality.

Intersectionality is not a new term or concept. Although it is central to the lives of marginalized people, it has been ignored, especially within the business world, for some time now. An intersectional framework recognizes and celebrates diverse experiences and talents. It is foundational to a more inclusive working environment. For example, it can be a lens through which businesses view hiring procedures, written and unwritten policies, and established company culture.

Creating an empowering and inclusive environment can be the key to retaining highly motivated and talented employees. For organizations, the benefits may include lower turnover rates; for employees, benefits may include more creativity and a higher likelihood of speaking up.⁴ When employees experience inclusion, they are part of an atmosphere in which they feel they belong and can contribute and thrive.⁵ As leaders become more adept at recognizing intersectionality and how our identities impact our daily lives, one thing remains constant: Considering the intersection of multiple social identities adds complexity to how we understand workplace experiences.

I stood up, and I did not think about my job, and I did not think about the money, I did not think about anything....I said, "I'm a human more than a Muslim. I'm a human more than a Pakistani woman....But you are judging me as a Pakistani Muslim woman....After [speaking out], I went to my manager and I...gave my resignation letter. Because this is too much. And I hope after [I left that] people would have a little bit of sense of respect for the people that are facing these...issues of [feeling excluded].

—Kay, South Asian Woman, Manager⁶

Roots of Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989⁷ when describing the systematic exclusion of Black women from anti-discrimination law that occurs, in part, through the separation of “race” and “gender” in discrimination claims. At the time, US courts dismissed Black women’s claims of employment discrimination at several businesses, concluding that there was no race discrimination because their case did not represent Black men and that there was no gender discrimination because the businesses employed White women.⁸ The courts did not recognize that a person who was both Black and a woman was discriminated against at these businesses.

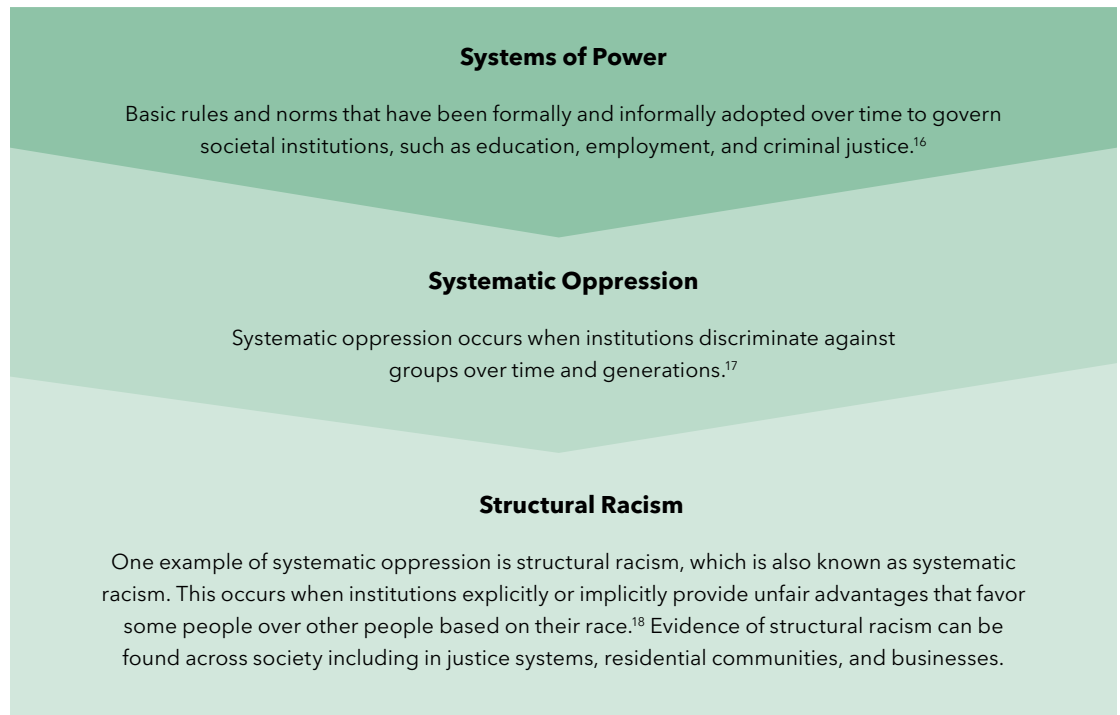
By naming intersectionality, Crenshaw labeled a concept already very familiar to Black women and other women of color advocating for their rights.⁹ For example, researchers have found that Black women are subjected to racism (sometimes in ways that are similar to how Black men experience it),¹⁰ and they’re subjected to sexism (sometimes in ways that are similar to how White women experience it).¹¹ But Black women also experience mistreatment based on the intersections of racism and sexism such as racialized sexual harassment, which cannot be parsed cleanly into “discrimination based on race” or “discrimination based on gender.”¹²

Because of its roots, the concept of intersectionality is used frequently to understand the ways that racism and sexism interlock,¹³ but the concept is broad and can also describe the interconnections among other types of oppression such as classism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and others.¹⁴

Systems of Power

Importantly, intersectionality not only describes the way that identities are intertwined; it also provides a lens to critique systems of power that oppress and advantage different people and to call for equity and justice for oppressed groups.¹⁵

This graphic shows how systems of power can affect the structures of societies and the people within them:



“Through this global phenomenon, people of (darker) color have been systematically marginalized. People in these communities around the world are disproportionately likely to live in poverty, suffer the impacts of climate change, experience hunger, die in childbirth, earn less, have unequal access to education, and be physically and economically impacted by Covid-19.”¹⁹

- Nikhil Bumb, Chris Carlson, & Lakshmi Iyer

Living and Working at the Intersections

Researchers and thought leaders have used the concept of intersectionality to understand the complexities of discrimination.²⁰ They have found that people oppressed by multiple systems of power **not only face discrimination related to each system; they also face discrimination at the intersections of those systems of oppression.**²¹ Here are some examples:

INTERSECTING IDENTITIES (EXAMPLES)	OUTCOME
RACE AND GENDER	Catalyst research on emotional tax found that East Asian (29%); South Asian (27%); and Black (31%) Canadian women; ²² and Latina (30%), Black (25%), Asian (18%), and multiracial (40%) US women ²³ are on guard (i.e., consciously preparing to deal with potential bias or discrimination) in anticipation of both racial or ethnic and gender bias against them. In addition, over one quarter of men of color in the US said they are on guard because of their gender, illustrating intersections of race and masculine gender norms. ²⁴
GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION	Trans men and trans women in Australia are more likely to experience “non-physical and physical abuse” than gay men and gay women are. ²⁵
GENDER AND ABILITY	In Nepal, women with disabilities are disproportionately undereducated, undertrained, medically undertreated, and discriminated against compared to men with disabilities. ²⁶
RACE, GENDER, AND RELIGION	In the Netherlands, 73% of Afghani-Dutch Muslim women who wear a headscarf reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of religion, compared with 11% of Afghani-Dutch Muslim women who don’t wear a headscarf. ²⁷
RACE, CLASS, AND INDIGENEITY	Systematic racism and colonialism work together to oppress Indigenous women in Canada at the intersections of race, gender, and class. This oppression is reinforced through stereotypes and the challenge of navigating “what it means to be Indigenous in a country that is celebrated for being multicultural and accepting.” ²⁸
RACE AND SKIN TONE	In the US, lighter-skinned Asian and Latinx people are more likely to hold a bachelor’s or more advanced degree compared with those with darker skin. ²⁹

How to Adopt an Intersectional Approach

Adopting an intersectional framework at work starts with asking critical questions of yourself, your employees, and your organization. Start with reevaluating or revamping your approach to metrics. Here are a few actions to consider.

- **Create more opportunities for employees to self-identify.** Do you have mechanisms or opportunities for your employees to self-identify (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality)? How can you expand upon what's already captured? Be mindful of the context, and know that self-identification can be an option in regions where other types of data gathering may be limited. Challenge your organization to think beyond the "We don't do that because this is the way it's always been" mindset. Stretch your thinking by learning from people who identify with subgroups of interest. At the same time, partner with your HR or Legal teams to create opportunities to collect data in new ways.
- **Take stock of what data you are collecting and what's missing.** Do your existing tools, measures, and metrics allow you to break down patterns and capture responses by a range of subgroup categories?
 - Don't assume you don't have a problem when you don't have enough data. If you don't have the data for these break downs, ask why.
- **Evaluate trends over time.** Ask what your hiring, promotion, and retention (among other metrics) look like over time. As you begin to create more opportunities for employees to self-identify or expand your measures of subgroup categories, you must hold your organization accountable. Longer-term assessments will help you understand patterns, strengths, and problem spots within your organization.
- **Representation ≠ Inclusion.** Don't focus solely on demographic representation. How are groups across intersections of identity experiencing your organization? Which subgroups feel included or excluded? Do employees receive equitable access to opportunities? Use all data at hand to understand people's varied experiences, and then create plans of action to build a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace.

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Endnotes

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