

An Equality At Work Thought Paper

CHALLENGING POWER IN THE BOARDROOM

Why intersectionality matters
and how you can apply it —
to diversity, equity and
inclusion, and beyond.

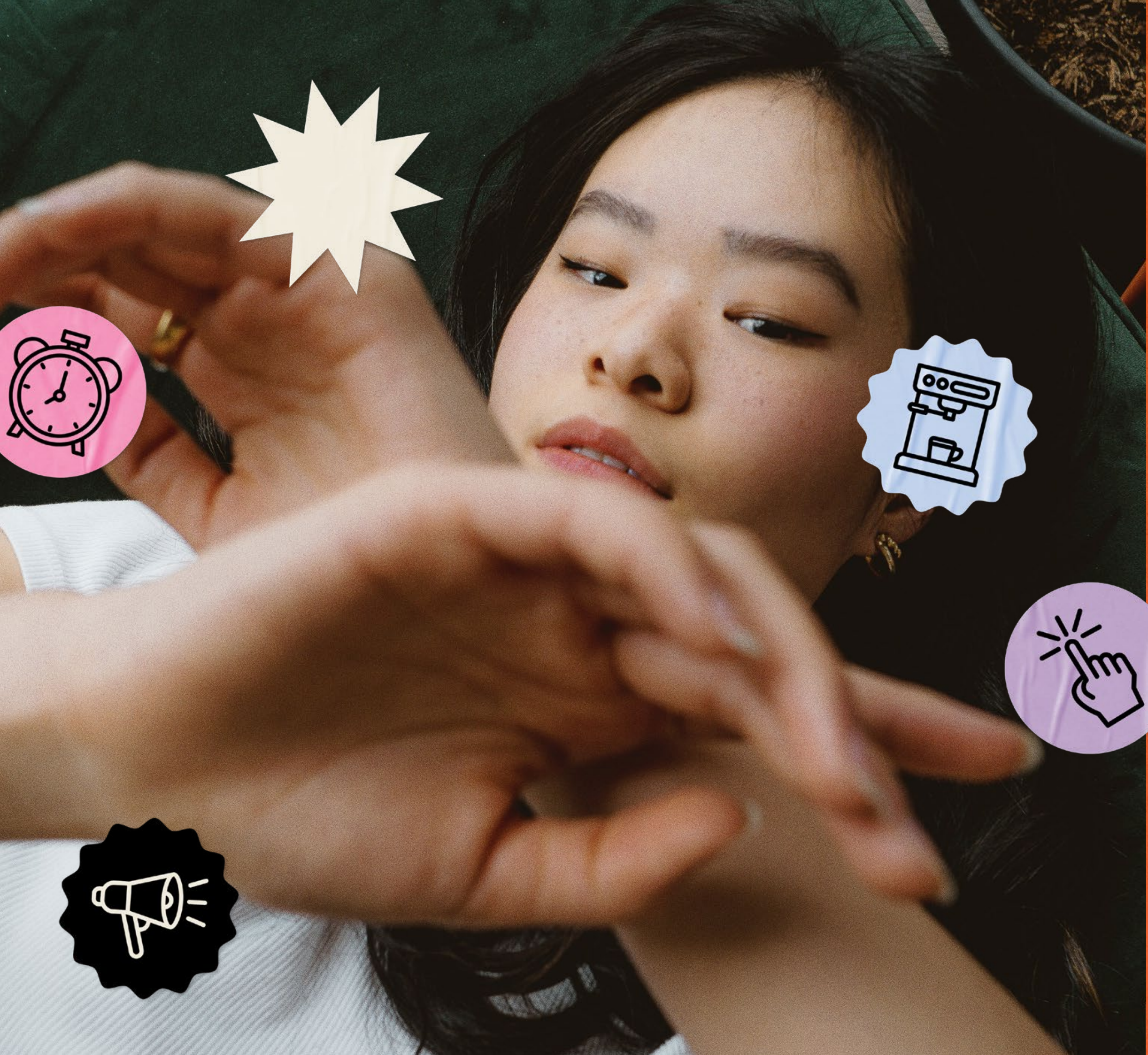


THE EQUALITY
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	<p>Lim, K., Harmer, S., Cerise, S., & Marshall, D. (2023). <i>Challenging power in the boardroom: Why intersectionality matters — and how you can apply it, to diversity, equity and inclusion and beyond</i>. The Equality Institute.</p>	<p>This thought paper, titled ‘Challenging power in the Boardroom,’ is published by The Equality Institute (EQI) to promote discussions on intersectionality and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in corporate and organisational settings.</p> <p>The paper addresses critical and sensitive topics, including gendered, sexual, domestic, and family violence, sexism and misogyny, ableism, mental illness, self-harm, suicide, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and workplace discrimination. The issues addressed may be distressing to some readers.</p> <p>Within this paper, we have introduced fictional characters with fictitious names to illustrate and dramatise intersectionality concepts. These fictional characters are introduced for illustrative purposes and do not represent real individuals or organisations. Some of these characters may be depicted in a slightly negative light to underscore the challenges related to these complex issues. Such portrayals are not intended to stereotype or offend any group but rather to underscore the multifaceted nature of these subjects.</p> <p>This paper is provided for educational purposes and to encourage thoughtful discussions on these challenging topics.</p>
<p>Acknowledgement of Country</p> <p>The Equality Institute (EQI) acknowledges the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander communities in preventing violence against women throughout Australia. Indigenous people’s generosity, hope, and ongoing efforts to prevent violence inspires us. We are committed to listening, learning, and doing this work alongside each other with humility, perseverance, and open hearts and minds. It is our hope that we can be a contributor to a future that is just and free from violence for communities everywhere.</p> <p>EQI was founded in Naarm (Melbourne, Australia) on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country. We pay our respects to the Traditional Owners of this land and waterways, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, as well as their elders, past and present. We also pay our respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia and acknowledge Traditional Custodians of the lands where EQI works around the world. The land we live, work, and play on, always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.</p>		<p>We strongly encourage readers to approach the content with sensitivity and care. If the content brings up personal issues or concerns, we recommend seeking professional support and resources. A list of referral support services is provided at the end of the paper.</p> <p>If you have any concerns, questions, or wish to provide feedback about the content within this thought paper, please feel free to contact us at admin@equalityinstitute.org</p>

—Not another DEI thought paper

WELCOOME



Ugh, the word makes me cringe.

Isn't intersectionality just identity politics on steroids?

I'm all for it!

INTERSECTIONALITY.

When you think of
the word, what
comes to mind?

It's just a buzzword.

I have no idea what intersectionality even is.

It's about diversity, right?

Welcome to *Challenging Power in the Boardroom*, an Equality at Work thought paper by The Equality Institute (EQI).

Here at EQI, intersectionality has been embedded in our work from the very beginning. In fact, our organisation was founded in part to address the lack of distinctly intersectional and feminist approaches in the gender equality space.

It's been called many things over the years, but in simple terms, intersectionality is a way to see and understand how different kinds of discrimination (based, for example, on race, class, gender, (dis)ability, age, class, and other factors) interact and 'intersect' with one another, resulting in impacts that are more complex and amplified than if just one form of marginalisation is experienced alone.

In this paper, we explain what it is, why it's so important and offer practical ideas on how to use it as a powerful force for change — in your workplace and beyond. As you'll read, radical Black feminists and other intersectional thinkers, past and present, have a thing or two to teach us about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) at work. And if you're struggling to make the progress you want to see in your workplace, intersectionality might just be the missing piece. Whether that be shifting cultures, addressing systemic inequalities, or making your leadership more genuinely inclusive, intersectionality will help you see and dismantle barriers to inclusion and belonging which so often stifle organisational success. And while it won't always be easy — it *is* achievable, and it's a concept that anyone can understand and apply in practice. Here, we show you how.

WHAT IS INTERSECT -IONALITY

—Clearing the conceptual cloud

How many legal theories can you name? What about ones that frequently spark controversy and heated debates in popular culture, academia, politics, schoolyards and yes, the workplace.¹ We'd hazard a guess it's not many. So how did intersectionality, a legal theory from the 80s and 90s, become so popular that it's been debated by politicians and talk show hosts, emblazoned on protest banners, and finding its way into our workplaces and organisations?

In 2015, the term first entered the dictionary. In 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, and the 2017 Women's March, held in protest of his election, sparked discussions around inclusivity which put intersectionality on front page headlines. After that, it was a prominent part of discussions surrounding Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and more. Suddenly, the term was everywhere in certain circles, often mentioned in popular culture and social media discussions on identity, racial and gendered justice, and calls for accountability. And that's just a very short history of how intersectionality went viral.

Fast forward to today, and discussions about intersectionality are commonplace in some circles, and completely absent in others. We don't know which camp you fall into — and for the purposes of this paper, we don't think it matters too much. Even if you have no idea what it means, you've probably seen it around, kind of like the actor in that Marvel movie. But the problem with getting famous, as anyone famous will tell you (ahem, not us), is that while many people *think* that they know and understand you, not many people actually do. And it's easy for your words to get taken out of context, or for people's *idea* you — to replace the truth of who you really are.

That's kind of what happened when intersectionality hit the mainstream. Suddenly, it was being used to describe all sorts of things, in so many different contexts, that even Kimberlé Crenshaw, the person who is often credited with coining the term (more on this later) was having trouble with its widespread use — lamenting that she was “amazed at how [intersectionality] gets over—and under—used; sometimes I can't even recognise it in the literature anymore.”² However, unlike your favourite pop idol, it *is* possible to get to know intersectionality. We can go back to the original writing and words of those who first developed the theory, and we can listen to those who have dedicated their lives to understanding and pushing forward the term, today.

The true history of intersectionality

So what actually is intersectionality, and where did it come from? Let's start from the beginning.

The term itself can be traced back to the work of US legal scholar, Black feminist, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw. In 1989, she coined the term within a ground breaking paper, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,’ as a way to unpack the inequity that Black women, specifically, face within and outside of the realms of the law.³ US discrimination law handles discrimination against specific groups, such as Black people and women, as distinctly separate issues. And yet through an analysis of specific cases, Crenshaw showed how Black women were exposed to specific forms of discrimination — based not only in their identity as women, and not only as Black, but as Black women specifically. ‘Intersectionality’ was her analogy for describing this phenomenon.


“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.”⁴

And, like traffic in an intersection, the impacts can be felt in complex and often compounding ways. Crenshaw continues:

“Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination — the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women — not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.”⁵

Thus, the term intersectionality was born, however while Crenshaw was the first person to articulate this analogy — the concept of intersectionality cannot be credited to her alone.

Angela Davis. In the 1970s-80s, Davis and her contemporaries developed the concept that became known as intersectionality as a core part of the Black feminist movement.



In 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered the famous speech, 'And Ain't I a Woman'. In it, she spoke about her experiences and hardships as an emancipated slave, who was both Black, and a woman,⁶ marking the first time Black civil rights and women's rights were linked together in a public statement.⁷

1851

1977

1984

1988

1989


1990



Prominent member of the *Combahee River Collective*, Audre Lorde, released an article in 1984, entitled 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House'. In it, she challenged White feminist thinkers to come to terms with the harmful ways they were conceiving of women as a homogeneous group.⁹

In 1988, sociologist Deborah King published 'Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness', in which she refers to the interdependence of classism, sexism, racism and other systems of oppression — and the oppressive and discriminatory effects of this on Black women in her life.¹¹

One year later, in 1990, Patricia Hill Collins released 'Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment'. In the book, Hill Collins catalogues the Black feminist intellectual tradition, within and outside of the academy. In the process, she also explores frameworks for interpreting it, including the 'matrix of domination', which refers to how intersections of oppression are structurally organised.¹³



Over 100 years later, the *Combahee River Collective*, released their eponymous statement in 1977, which linked Black women's rights with issues of class and sexual rights, as "the manifold and simultaneous oppressions women of colour face."⁸

In 1984, Denise Segura, sociologist and Chicana woman, published 'Chicanas and Triple Oppression in the Labor Force', in which she detailed the 'triple oppression' of race, class and gender as it related to Chicana women's experiences, one of a number of Global South-led contributions to the development of the term.¹⁰

In 1989, US legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw published the paper 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', which first identified the terminology of 'the intersection'.¹²

The Black feminist roots of intersectionality—

Intersectionality is, in fact, part of a much older and deeper tradition of Black feminist thought, which identifies the multiple forms of discrimination Black women face, and unpacks how they occur at a structural and systemic level and interact in complex ways.

Intersectionality, defined.

Today, intersectionality is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as:

"The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage."¹⁴

Our Workplace Gender Equality Lead, Shannon Harmer, likes to break it down like this:

1

An individual has social status and identity, for example, as a woman, a person of colour, and so on.

2

An individual encounters marginalisation, based on that social status and identity. These various forms of marginalisation (such as sexism, racism, ageism, homophobia, classism, and so on) often operate together and amplify one another.

3

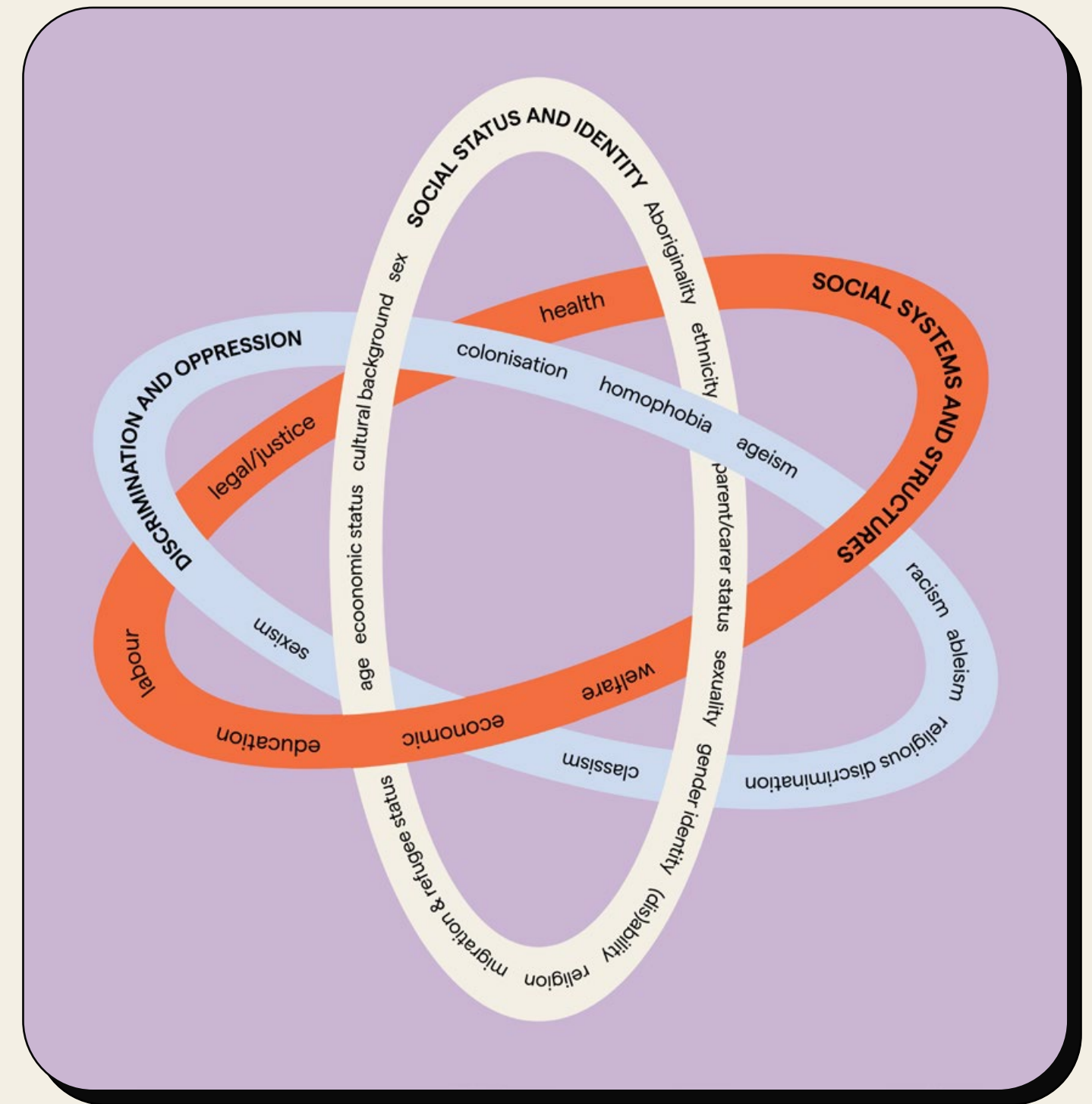
These encounters occur within the social systems and structures we interact with every day, i.e. when we access health care, seek education, and yes, when we go to work.

4

The marginalisation an individual faces can shift and change over time, and depending on where they are so, as a person gets older, how they experience ageism might evolve and change. Or if they move countries, their status in that country might be markedly different compared to their status in the place they have moved from, and so on.

5

A person can experience privilege due to one aspect of their identity, for example, as a White man in Australia, but also experience marginalisation due to another aspect of identity at the same time, such as being gay.



Intersectionality shows us how our societal structures and systems are far from neutral, and can uphold and reinforce inequities, which require conscious effort to uncover and dismantle. It also shows how different forms of structural inequality are connected. In other words, we can't work to dismantle one form of inequality without also dismantling the others.

Seeing intersectionality

This can all seem a little complex and theoretical — so let's bring it down to the everyday with a couple of examples which, although fictional, are drawn from real research into people's lived experiences.



“If we can’t see a problem, we can’t fix a problem.”
— *Kimberlé Crenshaw*¹⁵

Mona, 40

Mona (she/her) comes home from the environmental non-profit where she works, feeling utterly deflated. She has just spent all week preparing a new proposal for today’s meeting, but her manager cut her off whenever she tried to share, and refused to invite her to speak. It’s not like Mona is inexperienced or has nothing to say. She’s 40 years old, has a PhD, and 15 years of expertise in her field. Though Mona loves her job, she would probably best describe her time at work as ‘complicated.’ She experiences these kinds of aggressions, and worse, every single day. Not just from her manager, but from others too. Yesterday at work, her manager told her she just wasn’t ‘leadership material’. What does that even mean? Mona is a woman of colour and was born overseas. She is short and has an accent. Those are the only differences that Mona can think of, between herself and those who have been promoted above her.

When Mona was young, she moved to Australia to attend university. Not yet fluent in English, she struggled to navigate university life and find work in her field after she graduated. For some time, she worked nights at a bar where punters regularly made comments on her attractiveness and ethnicity. She was constantly worried about whether she would be able to pay rent or meet her visa requirements. These days, she rarely receives blatant unwanted sexual advances, and her status as a permanent resident means she no longer worries about being able to stay in Australia. Her job and her educational level also mean that finding secure work and housing is no longer daunting. But she still struggles to attain the recognition and career progression which seems to come so quickly to others. And her experiences are reflected in research on the lived experiences of women of colour in the Australian workplace.¹⁶

Let’s unpack Mona’s experience, through an intersectional lens:

1. **Mona has social status and identity:** As a woman and a person of colour from a migrant background, with English as a second language.
2. **She encounters overlapping and intersecting forms of marginalisation, based on this status and identity:** Mona experiences sexism and racism due to her identity, and these experiences are both unique and amplified by each other.
3. **This is all happening within systems and structures:** Mona’s experiences of marginalisation are embedded in her everyday interactions with structures and systems that are imbued with inequality — whether that be the workplace, the educational system, or the migration system.
4. **It can shift and evolve over time:** Mona’s experience of marginalisation has changed as she’s aged, gained permanent residency and achieved a higher level of education. She no longer faces sexual harassment and financial insecurity, but she still experiences marginalisation within and outside of the workplace.
5. **And these forms of marginalisation can coexist with experiences of privilege, at the same time:** Mona has a PhD and is highly educated, working in a professional context in a high-income country. These things afford her relative privileges, which occur alongside the disadvantages she faces.

Let's look at some other fictional examples.

Marti, 25

Marti (they/them) is screening their phone calls, again. It's probably Centrelink calling to see if they've found a job yet. They've got nothing to report, because yet again their search for graduate opportunities has been completely unfruitful. Marti is non-binary, and a recent graduate of mechanical engineering, a growing and in-demand field. Their grades were fantastic, but they receive all kinds of disparaging and ignorant comments in the recruitment process due to the fact that their distinctive appearance does not conform to binary presentations of gender. Fed up, Marti starts to wonder why they bother trying.



Jennifer, 39

Jennifer (she/her) starts back at work after parental leave. It's been a year since she stepped out of her role to have her third child, but the people, and the decor, have barely changed. Jennifer has worked in the same department at a regional council for over 15 years. She loves her job, and knows she's ready for more, but her manager advises her not to think about it. She's got three kids at home, and her husband works long hours running the family farm. There's no way she could possibly maintain the responsibilities of a more senior role. That's what she's told, anyway. "It's just the way things are around here," Angela, her colleague, tells her. "They said the same thing to me when I came back from parental leave. That's why it's all men in leadership, and we're still stuck out here getting coffees." She laughs, but Jennifer doesn't find it funny.



WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

In Marti's case, their identity as a non-binary recent graduate is met with marginalisation, particularly in the hiring practices of the mechanical engineering organisations where they are trying to find work.

Jennifer is coming up against gendered biases in the culture of the rural council where she works, which are expressed in dominant ideas about things like what a leader looks like, who should be doing care work, what's required of a leadership position, and whether it can be flexible. This also intersects with her rural location, and the specific inequities and cultural norms this produces.

These trends don't just apply to the realm of fiction though. Consider these real-life Australian workplace statistics:

- ◆ **People with Disability:** Employment discrimination against people with a disability is ongoing and systemic,¹⁷ and women with disability are particularly affected. They have lower workforce participation rates than men with disability, and are also more likely to work in informal, vulnerable, part-time, and lower-paid jobs; are less likely to be in paid workforce; and more likely to be paid less.¹⁸ They are also more likely to experience sexual harassment than women without disability.¹⁹
- ◆ **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People:** Are overall underrepresented in leadership roles, and more likely to be paid less, and experience unemployment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women participate in the workforce at lower rates than both Indigenous men and non-Indigenous women. They are also paid less than Indigenous men.²⁰
- ◆ **People from culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) backgrounds:** Are often over-represented in low-paid and insecure work, as a result of language barriers, social exclusion, and financial difficulty. But migrant and refugee women are more likely to work in low-income, low-skilled and insecure jobs than migrant and refugee men,²¹ and CARM women experience significantly lower rates of workforce participation than CARM men.²²
- ◆ **People in regional, rural and remote areas:** Face barriers, because of limited access to services, employment, and other opportunities. Further, women are more likely to face workplace discrimination, sexual harassment, violence, and economic insecurity when they live in rural and remote locations than when they do not.²³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are also more likely to live in remote areas than their non-Indigenous counterparts.²⁴
- ◆ **Older people:** Face age discrimination in recruitment, accessing training and flexible work, and in decisions around redundancies. Older women have higher unemployment rates and earn less than older men. Women also retire with significantly less superannuation (\$80,000 AUD for women, compared to \$150,000 AUD for men), because of factors including the gender pay gap, exclusion from the labour market due to caring responsibilities, and other gender and age-related factors, which compound over time.²⁵
- ◆ **LGBTIQ+ people:** Experience marginalisation in the workplace due to their sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or these things combined, and report lower levels of inclusion, and higher levels of exclusion in the workplace. A recent Australian survey found that 50% of LGBTQIA+ respondents had experienced homophobia. For trans or intersex employees, this might also include not being accepted as their gender identity.²⁶
- ◆ **People with caring responsibilities:** Statistics show that people who support minors, or people with medical conditions, people with a disability, people with substance abuse issues or those aged or frail, are more likely to experience marginalisation in the workplace, less likely to have professional development opportunities, and more likely to change their job or drop out of the workforce.²⁷



Spot any patterns? That's right — while people who experience one form of marginalisation will be disadvantaged in our workplace, people who experience multiple will likely find themselves even more impacted, often in complex and compounding ways. If this doesn't seem fair, you're right, it isn't. But this isn't the end of the story. We'll explore how workplaces can remove barriers and create a safe and inclusive workplace for Marti, Jennifer, Mona, and many others, later.

Why all of this matters

These patterns of marginalisation and disadvantage don't just play out in the workplace. On a wider societal level, the same patterns can also be observed, with dire consequences in people's lives.

Did you know? In Australia...

1

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience disproportionately high rates of violence,²⁸ and in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal women experience some of the highest rates of violence in the world.²⁹ The hospitalisation rate for assaults of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is 27 times that of non-Indigenous women.³⁰

2

A disproportionate number of LGBTQIA+ Australians report worse mental health outcomes and have higher risk of suicidal behaviours than their peers. The reasons for this are directly linked to their experiences of stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and abuse based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.³¹

3

In addition to the risk of physical and sexual violence based on their gender, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds are also particularly vulnerable to financial abuse, reproductive coercion, and immigration-related violence, for example, withholding documents, threats of visa cancellations or deportation..³²

4

45% of people with a disability in Australia live in poverty.³³ That statistic alone is shocking — but women with disability also spend more of their income on medical care and health-related expenses than men with disability,³⁴ and spend almost 2.5 times as much on health care each year than women without disability.³⁵ In fact, 61% of women with disability report that they cannot afford to cover their basic needs on their current income.³⁶

Of course, many members of these communities live happy, healthy lives, but these shocking statistics are not an accident, and it doesn't have to be this way. Remember: an intersectional lens helps us uncover and address these inequalities.

Checking in...

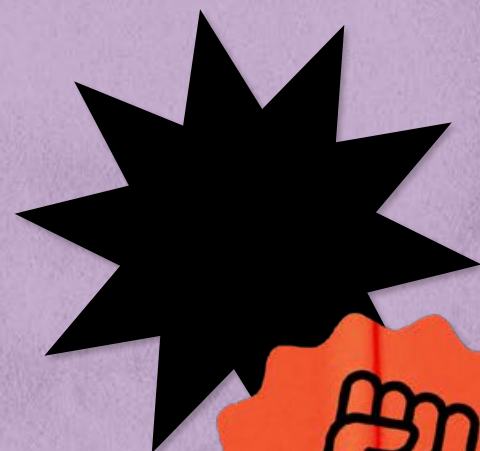
How are you doing?

We know this topic can be a lot to take in for some. If you need to, take a big breath and a moment for yourself. The good news is — there's stuff we can do about it. Real, tangible things that have positive flow-on effects in our lives.

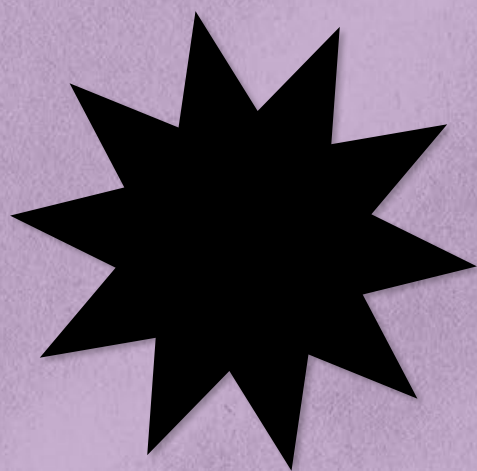
But before we get to that, it's time to correct the record on a few important things.



BUSTING



THOSE



MYTHS

There's a lot of *misconceptions* out there about intersectionality, so we thought we should set the record straight, and bust some common myths. Think of this section as your handy guide whenever 'Darren from Logistics' pops up to try and have a political debate about the latest thing he heard about the term on Sky News. *You're about to get owned, Darren.*



Myth #1

Intersectionality is identity politics on steroids.

BUSTED: This is one we hear often from conservative commentators. That intersectionality is all about identity politics; about creating new hierarchies and putting the 'most oppressed' at the top. And whilst they might be the most vocal critics of the term, a lot of its modern-day proponents in progressive circles also often misunderstand this point. While Crenshaw and others *did* draw attention to the patterns of discrimination that people can face as a group based on their identity, this was never Crenshaw's intention. In fact, she's rallied against having the concept dissolve into mere identity politics, because Crenshaw was never actually all that concerned with discussions about identity. For her, it was about a way to lead the conversation towards deep structural and systemic questions about how discrimination operates — and how it can be dismantled. In other words, it's not about creating new hierarchies, folks. It's about dismantling them altogether³⁷

Myth #2

Intersectionality means we need to create smaller and smaller categories for everyone, including the person with the pink hair.

BUSTED: This one's actually been around for a while. One of the ways Crenshaw used the concept of intersectionality originally was to critique a ruling whereby a judge rejected a discrimination claim brought by Black women on the grounds it would set a standard for more and more sub-categories to be created.³⁸ However, although this is an important piece, the main focus of intersectionality is not on the categorisation of identity. Intersectionality is asking us to radically imagine a world where systems meet individuals as whole people first — and no longer treat people of different identity groups unequally.



“Taking an intersectional approach doesn't mean that your activities include absolutely everyone, can overcome every obstacle, and accommodate every possible situation. It means you are aware of the gaps; you are ensuring that your own work practices and policies are not creating obstacles and that you are working towards fair and equitable opportunities for everyone.”³⁹

We've got more to say on this, but let's finish busting these myths first.

Myth #3

Intersectionality is the same as diversity, equity and inclusion.

BUSTED: If you've heard about intersectionality in the workplace, there's a chance you've come across it in discussions around broader diversity, equity, and inclusion. Sometimes the terms are thrown in together, as if they mean the same thing. But though they are often used interchangeably and share some overlap — they're not the same thing.

Myth #4

It's possible to be intersectional without examining our own power and privilege.

BUSTED: There's something we haven't mentioned yet, but it's super important. Intersectionality is fundamentally tied to conversations about power and privilege: who has it, how it's used, who it benefits, and why. Inequities don't just exist in the outside world. They are within all of us, in the form of our biases, attitudes and beliefs, that shape our behaviours and actions in the world. We are all, in various ways, privileged and marginalised — that is, we experience unearned advantages and disadvantages based on various aspects of our identity. The power we hold is sometimes unfairly earned, and sometimes, even when we don't intend to, the things we do with our power can cause harm.

It's important to get these definitions right, so let's unpack them:

- ◆ **Intersectionality** is a lens through which to see how different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to different forms of discrimination and marginalisation that are either amplified or unique.
- ◆ **Diversity** is about the practice, or quality, of including people from lots of different backgrounds and lived experiences.
- ◆ **Equity** is about fairness. It's about achieving equal outcomes for everyone, rather than treating everybody the same.
- ◆ **Inclusion** is about ensuring that everyone feels valued and included as an individual in the workplace. It goes deeper than diversity — it means embracing and valuing the diversity of the people around you, and encouraging them to be their whole selves within, and outside of, work. It's often used adjacently to 'belonging', which entails the belief that one is connected, supported, and respected at work.

The Diversity Council of Australia (DCA) likes to put it this way:

"We describe diversity as being the mix of people in your organisation, inclusion is about creating a workplace environment that enables that mix to work — for organisations and employees and intersectionality refers to the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation."⁴⁰

Well said, DCA. Intersectionality is not about ensuring your workplace is diverse, and it's not the same as equity and inclusion — though these are great to strive for. It's a way of working and a way of seeing, which works not from a single issue outward, but from the margins in. It is a crucially important concept, and we believe you simply can't build a diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace, without it.

An intersectional approach is just as much about inner work, as it is about outer work, and, for those of us who hold positions of relative power and privilege in our society, it might also involve giving up some of that power, to make space for others. That's a difficult thing to acknowledge, and it gets to the heart of why intersectionality can be so controversial. As Crenshaw writes,

"Plenty of people choose not to assume that the prism [of intersectionality] necessarily demands anything in particular of them."⁴¹

But it does. It requires learning new skills, and developing your capacity for critical thinking and empathy, acknowledging your own power and experiences of privilege and marginalisation, and examining your own biases and beliefs. For DEI leaders, practitioners, managers, and anyone who wants to create a fairer and more equal world, this is a step you simply cannot skip.

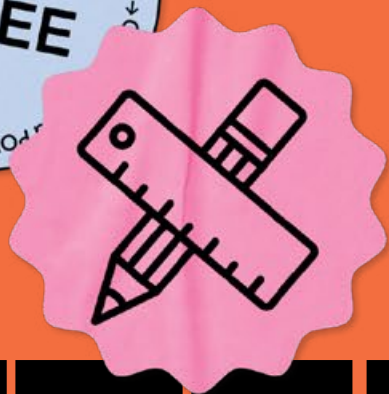
In the words of our
Strategic Advisor
Somali Cerise:



“If you aren’t making the progress you want in your DEI work, *intersectionality is the missing piece*. And, while it is possible to do diversity, equity and inclusion without it, if you want to do it well, *intersectionality needs to be at the heart*.” It’s time to get into the details of exactly how to apply intersectionality in practice and why it can be such a *powerful tool for change*, in the workplace and beyond. *Let’s go.*



INTERSECTIONALITY IN PRACTICE





In her book 'Sister Outsider' Audre Lorde wrote:
"There is no such thing as a single—issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."⁴²

Most DEI efforts start from the perspective of single issues - that is - separate, distinct initiatives aimed at benefitting 'women', or LGBTQIA+ employees, or CARM employees, or otherwise.

Let's say someone in your workplace is organising an International Women's Day morning tea. Let's call her Linda. The cupcakes are out, and there will be a panel of special guests speaking for the occasion. You attend — but when you're there, you notice that the guests on the panel — and the images of women featured in promotional material, are overwhelmingly White, cisgender and without any visible disabilities.

You mention this fact, and the room goes silent. Linda, herself a White, cisgender woman, awkwardly takes you aside and explains. "It's about resourcing," she says. "We've fought so hard to get gender equality on the agenda, and it would dilute our efforts too much to focus on other issues at the same time. We just need to focus on women first, then we'll be able to cover the rest later."

While this example is slightly over-dramatised, similar scenarios play out in workplace DEI strategies all the time. If you're in a DEI or People and Culture team yourself, you've probably had to deal with situations where your resourcing is limited, and you've had to make difficult decisions about where to put your time, money, and efforts. The logic, without an intersectional lens, would seem to be that focusing on too many 'sub-categories' at once will dilute efforts in diversity, equity and inclusion and slow down our progress towards gender equality. But this couldn't be further from the truth. Consider these two statistics, on women in leadership and the gender pay gap, two common aims of workplace gender equality strategies.

It's not about cupcakes.



What single-issue approaches get wrong about DEI.

A recent US-based study on women in leadership found that:

Only **1 in 4** C-suite leaders is a woman, and only **1 in 20** is a woman of colour. For every **100** men who are promoted from entry level to manager, only **87** women are promoted, and only **82** women of colour are promoted.⁴³

Another study (also US-based) took a look at the gender pay gap, through an intersectional lens:

In the study, women, on average, earned just **83 cents for every \$1** earned by men. Despite having some of the largest workforce participation rates, Black women earn just **64 cents for every \$1** earned by white, non-Hispanic men and Hispanic women earn just **57 cents for every \$1** earned by white, non-Hispanic men.⁴⁴

In Australia, on average, women earn **87 cents for every \$1 earned** by men. Research by Mind Tribes indicates an ethnic pay gap of around **33-36%** in Australia.⁴⁵ However as for comprehensive intersectional data on the gender pay gap in Australia... well, unfortunately, at the time of writing this paper, it doesn't yet exist.

Without an intersectional lens, our work will have gaps, it will perpetuate inequities, and it will leave people behind. Without an intersectional approach, your efforts to advance gender equality, will only reach for 'some women', often those who are the most privileged, and leave others behind.



From the margins, to the centre: How intersectionality changes your diversity strategy

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective wrote this in their eponymous statement:

"If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."⁴⁶

In the words of Celeste Liddle:

"(Intersectionality is about) a radical politics of liberation based on the principle that the advancement of those on the bottom rungs of society ends up benefitting others because to do so requires the bottom-up systematic dismantling of the structures which oppress."⁴⁷

An intersectional approach argues that the fastest way to remove barriers for *everyone* is to focus on the *most marginalised* among us first. And in the process, everyone benefits. These statements highlight a key principle of an intersectional approach - working from the margins, to the centre. This involves working at a structural level, as well as on your everyday behaviours (more on this later). In the process, an intersectional approach focuses on dismantling the sources of these inequities - and building new systems and structures that are fair for everyone.



That's what we're talking about
when we talk about liberation.



SIX KEY STRATEGIES TO APPLY INTERSECTIONALITY IN PRACTICE

—in the workplace and beyond

1

Listen, learn

and reflect

Applying an intersectional approach in practice requires that we have an accurate idea of what's going on. And the people who are truly experts in the lived experience of culture within your organisation are the people who experience it. To do this, we need to put any assumptions we might have aside, and make time to listen. We also need to pay attention to who we are listening to. Do the voices at our decision-making tables reflect the true diversity of our organisation, and are those who are most impacted by decisions consulted throughout the process?

Listening requires building trust and creating a safe space for people to be honest. Change doesn't happen overnight, and it's likely you'll need to prove you're genuinely willing to listen, learn and take on board what you hear. People from marginalised backgrounds are often over-consulted — so any listening must be followed with action and accountability for those who have generously shared their stories. It's possible that what you hear will be confronting, but it's vital as those who are the most impacted by the barriers other people might not notice, will be able to diagnose problems, contribute to solutions and design the future of work. This applies not only to HR-related matters — but at every point across your organisation.



Reflection questions

- ◆ Do our planning and decision-making processes meaningfully include diverse voices, especially those who are most impacted?
- ◆ Is there a culture of trust and are we creating safe spaces for people to speak openly about their experiences in our organisation?
- ◆ When people do share, are we demonstrating that we are listening to them and learning? Are we taking accountability where needed and acting to positively shift our behaviours and actions?

2

Make your data intersectional

Remember, as Crenshaw and others were quick to emphasise, a Black woman is never just Black, or just a woman — but always specifically a Black woman, everywhere that she goes. This seems obvious, when described in this way. Yet our workplace practices do not reflect this reality. Importantly, an intersectional approach involves acknowledging that we are all made up of a multitude of identities, and it isn't possible to leave parts of ourselves behind, at will.

Think about data, for example. Often, workplace surveys and diversity statistics (if collected at all), force us to choose between various binary identities and categories, if we feel safe disclosing this in the first place. When the data is analysed, it's often analysed separately, rather than being viewed holistically, through an intersectional lens. As we've seen, this can cause big distortions. It's very possible for a gender pay gap to look better from one angle, but from another, very different. The same goes for our leadership targets, and so on.

On a more human level, it can be alienating to be asked to choose between categories which may not reflect your identity. So wherever possible, get beyond the binary categories — and ask people how they would like to identify. Use this data to analyse your diversity targets through multiple dimensions. It's also vital to build in processes of confidentiality and transparency around data collection. Some people might not feel comfortable sharing their data, and for good reason. For example, a person might feel their sexual orientation could be used against them in the workplace and choose not to disclose. Always explain why you are collecting the data and how it will be used. It's up to employers to build trust and be open and honest. For some, it may simply not be safe to share it, which means there's work to be done to create safe and inclusive cultures.

Reflection questions

- ◆ What data are we collecting, why and how? Do our processes allow individuals to define their identity and experiences in their own words?
- ◆ How are we analysing our data? Does it consider the true richness of people's lived experiences?
- ◆ When we report on our organisational goals and achievements (such as gender representation in leadership, and so on), what do these look like through an intersectional lens?



3

'Intersectionalise'

the employee experience

Yes, we know. 'Intersectionalise' is not a real word. But perhaps it should be: a word to express the powerful and transformative opportunities and outcomes that can be identified and achieved when we apply an intersectional lens to our systems. You see, individuals experience discrimination when they interact with systems and structures which means we need to make changes at a structural level. These are proactive, forward-thinking actions to remove the barriers to access for everyone in your workplace, from the margins to the centre.

And where better to start than the employee lifecycle? This set of systems, processes, policies, and practices might just be one of the most significant factors shaping the way that individuals experience your workplace. And it too, is probably hiding harmful inequities. Unless, of course, it's been 'intersectionalised.' One place to start is to identify each area of the employee lifecycle, and ask yourself some critical questions. Who is this process excluding or disadvantaging? Who is it unfairly benefitting, and why? What barriers do people experience when they interact with this process, and how can we work to remove them?

This might involve more listening or gathering extra data (see strategies one and two), or even doing some inner work, to help you better see and identify these hidden systemic biases (more on that to come). All stages of the lifecycle and all decision-making mechanisms should be considered — from recruitment and attraction, to promotion, and resignation. Not that anyone will want to leave, by the time you're done. And remember, removing barriers to the *most* marginalised in your organisation is the fastest way to remove barriers for everyone. So focus your efforts there first.

Intersectionality across the employee lifecycle

There are many ways to apply an intersectional approach across the employee lifecycle. We often undertake a much more in-depth exercise of this with organisations to support them in applying an intersectional approach to DEI efforts, but here's a list of questions to help you get started.

Recruitment

- ◆ Is inclusive language used in job advertisement?
- ◆ What recruiting platforms are you advertising positions on? Is there scope to advertise with job boards that specifically target working mothers, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ jobseekers, and other diverse groups and communities?
- ◆ Given that women will generally only apply for a job where they fit 90-100% of criteria, do you encourage applicants from all genders and intersections of marginalisation to apply?

Selection

- ◆ How are selection criteria developed? Have you taken steps to avoid bias during this process, including consulting people with diverse lived experiences?
- ◆ What assumptions are you making in your selection process? For example, do you assume that a leader should be outwardly extroverted or confident? Or that a client-facing role cannot be fulfilled by someone with an accent? How might this unfairly advantage some applicants over others?
- ◆ Are you seeking to invest in the development of people who may not have a 'perfect' CV, to ensure a diverse workforce? Will you also consider other factors, such as family violence, trauma, caring responsibilities, and more, which might cause gaps and lower levels of experience in a CV?

Induction and policies

- ◆ What tools do you need to promote genuine commitment to equality for everyone, across all staff?
- ◆ Do you have in place policies which accommodate for people with diverse needs? These might include flexible work arrangements; special accommodations; cultural leave and family violence policies. What others can you think of?
- ◆ Are induction materials accessible? For example, are they written in simple language or plain English?

Management and leadership

- ◆ Are management and leadership supported and encouraged to promote inclusion, through an intersectional lens? This might include KPIs and accountability processes, inclusive leadership training, tools, and support to address internal resistance, and protocols for working with staff.
- ◆ Do management and leadership support an inclusive culture? Is there capacity to listen if someone speaks up about feeling marginalised? Do people get penalised for 'speaking up'? If so, who are the people being penalised, and who decides? How can you track this, and be transparent about findings?

Reward and promotion

- ◆ Is there disaggregated data on who receives reward and promotion within your organisation? Are there patterns in this data, when viewed with an intersectional lens? How might you support staff who have previously not been 'rewarded' to progress and be recognised?
- ◆ What kind of behaviour is rewarded? What kind of person is seen as a leader in the workplace?
- ◆ Are there opportunities for people with caring responsibilities to progress if they are part-time?

Termination/Resignation

- ◆ Are you gathering feedback and acting on it when people leave? Do staff feel safe to share feedback on working with your organisation?
- ◆ What systems and processes can be implemented to better understand the experience of your workplace culture, and how this may contribute to negative employee attitudes and behaviours?
- ◆ Does your organisation practise zero-tolerance for any form of violence or harassment? This may include a harassment policy and more.

Examine everyday behaviours

Discrimination, power imbalances and unconscious biases can be ‘sneaky’. They’re not just embedded in our systems and structures, they’re also all around us in our day-to-day interactions, with our managers, our teammates, and everyone around us. Think about the situations and scenarios you might find yourself in at work every day. What are the dominant worldviews in the room? Who is implicitly included, and who is not? How can we make sure that we are making space for people to show up in our everyday interactions with us as their whole selves? And what can we do to be better allies to those around us?

These are all questions you can ask yourself to better understand how to embed an intersectional approach within your everyday behaviours. You can ask those around you what they think, too. You might be surprised about how you come across to others. Take your intersectional lens out for a walk in your everyday workplace interactions and see what you find. Who gets support and mentorship in your team? Who gets to speak in meetings? Who is left out of workplace social events where key contacts and networks are gained? And don’t stop there — once you notice what’s happening, act. Speak up when you notice inequities. Make space for someone who is underheard to speak. Educate yourself to better understand the dynamics at play.

Because inclusion isn’t just the job of People and Culture, HR, leadership or the DEI team, it’s *everyone’s* job.

Reflection questions

- ◆ In our workplace culture and day-to-day experience of the organisation, who is perceived to be competent? Who gets rewarded, and why?
- ◆ What is perceived to be ‘normal’ — and who is outside of that so-called ‘norm’? How do they experience the culture of our organisation?
- ◆ How do people perceive me in the workplace? Do my actions and words exclude, or include?



Lisa's Story

“You speak great English.”

“My best friend is gay.”

“OMG, I love your hair. Can I touch it?”

It’s easy to think of our everyday actions as somehow small and unimportant. You can see it even in the language of the word ‘micro-aggressions’, which is often used to describe the indirect, subtle, or unintentional forms of discrimination people who experience marginalisation encounter all too regularly in their everyday. In reality, there is nothing ‘micro’ about a micro-aggression.

Lisa Martello is a CARM woman with over 15 years’ experience managing complex and high-profile infrastructure projects, and a passionate advocate for equality, diversity, and inclusion. Here, she shares her story.

I had not long returned from a work trip to another country. I’d organised the entire trip through my contacts and connections — every site visit, every project meeting, even a recruitment event.

Upon my return to my country of residence, I put together a series of presentations capturing all the insights we had learned during the trip. One such presentation was all about people, inclusion, diversity and recruitment and I was given an opportunity to present it at an upcoming HR and Talent team day.

I went suited, booted, and well-prepared.

I walk into the room — I see about 25 people, half of whom I know. Mostly white women.

I greet the people I know, introduce myself to some of the people I don’t know and sit down at the table to plug in my laptop and get started. I’m a little nervous — I don’t love public speaking, but the room seems jovial which is helping to calm my nerves.

As my presentation is loading on the screen, I suddenly feel two hands in my hair doing what I can only describe as “herbal-essencing” me. The person is effectively massaging my head and running her fingers through my hair from behind me whilst saying, *“Oh my goodness, your curls, your hair. I love your hair, your curls are amazing”*.



She takes her hands out of my hair, drops her head around in front of me and says, *"I'm Georgina, by the way"*. We had never met.

No one says anything, the Head of HR is sat directly in front of me less than a metre away, looking right at me, blatantly having seen what just happened. She doesn't say anything.

I am shaken, and I am faced with the immediate decision of whether to say something in that moment or not, knowing that if I do, I will tank the mood for my presentation and end up even more nervous than I already am. I decide not to speak up, after all — no one else seems to see it as a problem. I deliver my presentation.

For days and weeks afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I went from initially thinking I was OK about it, to becoming increasingly troubled. Even now it's hard to write.

Every time I thought about it, whichever layer I peeled back, it would lead me to something bad:

1

I walked into the room as a suited and booted senior leader, and I felt reduced to a girl in the toilets with nice hair.

2

My personal boundaries were violated — I became a curiosity. Something to touch and feel because it's new to you and you want to know what it feels like.

3

I felt stripped of my seniority, of the respect I deserve as a) a person, and b) a senior person in the organisation. I felt like a novelty being humoured, not like a leader giving a presentation.

4

Everybody saw and nobody said anything, and I was in a room full of the people that set the standard of acceptability in our workplace. It didn't make me feel good about the response I would get if I chose to report it.

5

Would it have happened to a male senior leader?

A couple of weeks later, I was in a team coaching session with my leadership team, and we had to do an activity where we picked a card from a deck to describe how we were feeling that week. I found myself getting increasingly upset because I couldn't find a card in the deck negative enough to describe how I felt. When it got to my turn to talk about my card, I burst into tears and had to leave the room.

After initially shrugging it off when I had reported the incident to my (white, male) boss the first time, he realised from that breakdown that "it must have upset me more than he had realised".

I decided that I was ready to report it. I asked him to raise it with the Executive Director and the Head of HR, with strict boundaries that I did not want the outcome of this to be me having to have a coffee with the Head of HR. I did not want to have a moment of individual reflection, I wanted the organisation to do something more corporately reflective — a behavioural review, cultural awareness training perhaps, a values moment, an apology — something meaningful.

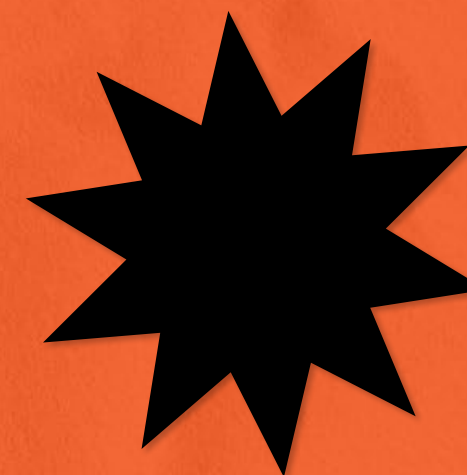
He reported it on my behalf, and here's what they said:

- ♦ The Head of HR "didn't see".
- ♦ I should "assume positive intent".
- ♦ The outcome is that I should go for a coffee with the Head of HR.

I refused to go for that coffee, because I know she did see, and I was not prepared to 'pretend' that she didn't. To have a hypothetical conversation about actions she would have taken had she seen. She was looking directly at me. I know that because the event happened in slow motion for me. By saying that she didn't see, it told me all I needed to know about the likelihood of any kind of genuine individual or organisational learning taking place in response to what happened.

If you're reading this and thinking, what's the big deal? Imagine the same scenario but with a *male director*. Have you ever seen a someone go up to a male director in your organisation and touch their shiny bald head to see what it feels like? Or give them a quick head massage before they start a presentation?

If you did see that / if you did that, I reckon everyone would think it was pretty shocking and inappropriate right?



5

Ensure your leadership and management is diverse and inclusive

If you're a manager or in a senior leadership position, in the words of our Strategic Advisor, Somali Cerise, it's highly likely that you have an "outsized impact" on your workplace culture. Our leaders are often our most visible representatives, and they send a strong signal, within and outside our organisation, about who belongs, and who does not. Many organisations now focus on diversity and representation within their leadership teams for this very reason. But if everyone in leadership acts, or is forced to act, in a homogeneous way, then no matter how much diversity we've got in the room, it's a bit of a stretch to claim that your culture is genuinely inclusive.

To put an intersectional lens on the matter, ask yourself. What kind of behaviours are condoned and rewarded in our organisation? Who gets promoted, and why? What kinds of norms and implicit biases does this reflect? And does this reflect our true values and how we want to represent ourselves as an organisation? Gender equality and cultural diversity are perhaps the two most common ways we analyse diversity in leadership, but an intersectional approach invites us to go much deeper. For example, going beyond these single issues alone, what do these statistics look like when analysed *together*? Who is not being counted? What can we do to better understand their experiences, and remove barriers to leadership for them?

How we lead and manage is also hugely important. An intersectional approach asks that we see and value the whole person, in all the complexity of their identity, in a way that makes sense to them. If you're a leader in your organisation, instead of making assumptions, let people tell you what they need, and how they want to be managed. Create a culture in your team that supports every individual to feel included, without having to leave aspects of their identities behind. Rather than asking employees to perform a particular kind of productivity, or trying to dictate *how* the work gets done — allow flexibility to demonstrate *results*. And while you are at it, don't forget to be aware of your employees' wellbeing and how events within and outside the workplace may impact it.

Reflection questions

- ◆ Am I working in partnership with my employees — and involving them in the decisions that affect them?
- ◆ Am I allowing employees the flexibility to choose how they undertake their role?
- ◆ Am I continuing to learn and challenge my own beliefs and biases about my team members' needs?
- ◆ Am I aware of events going on in the wider world, and how they might affect my team member's wellbeing?



6

Keep doing the inner work

In our first Equality at Work paper, 'Equality at Work: Building cultures of inclusion and belonging in a new era of organisational accountability,' we talked about the importance of doing inner work, and building self-awareness, critical thinking skills and capacity for empathy in the face of diversity. This is just as true for intersectionality.

Self-awareness can include taking responsibility for what you bring to the table, and being aware of how small gestures might be experienced as inequities. It can involve building awareness of your privilege, biases, and assumptions, learning to regulate your emotions and responses to expand your capacity to listen and receive feedback — and many more things besides. It can also involve becoming more aware of the intersecting aspects of your own identity, and developing the confidence to share your story, opening safety for others to do the same.

Reflection questions

- ◆ What are the unquestioned assumptions I hold about others?
- ◆ How do others perceive me, and how does this help, or hinder my desire for inclusion?
- ◆ What are the intersecting aspects of my identity? What are my own experiences of power, privilege and marginalisation?

A new ending.

Let's come back to Mona, Marti and Jennifer's stories, and see how taking an *intersectional approach* in the workplace could change things for better.

Mona, 40

One day, Mona and her manager attend a major environmental conference. The agenda is curated by Indigenous women and women of colour, who speak passionately about the need for an intersectional approach within the environmental movement and call out the lack of diversity within organisations in the space. The next day, Mona and her manager return to their office, which is staffed mainly by non-Indigenous and White women. Except for management, which is made up of predominantly White men. Mona suddenly finds herself enraged. She begins to call out the sexism and racism occurring within the organisation all around her, and finds that, to her surprise, others speak up and agree. A conversation begins to grow. Mona's manager is also affected by the talk. He starts to educate himself about the experiences of others, and advocates for an intersectional approach at the leadership level. He asks Mona what more he can do to support her, and realises he needs to change his behaviour. He stops talking over Mona in meetings and speaks up when other team members do so, too.

Feeling pressure from outside and within, Mona's organisation realises they have a lot of work to do when it comes to inclusion. They create safe spaces to listen to the stories of people with diverse lived experiences within their organisation and present the findings back to their staff. They provide training around unconscious bias, and all leaders attend an inclusive leadership course, where intersectionality is the focus. Slowly, the organisation's culture begins to shift. And as it does, something curious begins to happen. Their famously high rates of burnout and staff turnover begin to lessen. It turns out women of colour and carers had been resigning disproportionately, but a more inclusive culture encouraged employees across the board to stay. Mona and others with diverse lived experiences began to feel safe sharing their honest opinions, and as a result, their organisation was able to pre-empt risks, and devise innovative solutions to emerging issues which would not have been possible without their insights. Now in a leadership role, Mona is seen as a mentor and an innovator within her organisation, which is entering a new and significant period of growth. Things are busy, but Mona leaves work each day feeling something that she hasn't felt in a long time. *Happy.*

Marti, 25

After almost losing hope, Marti decides they will continue their job search, under one condition: they *only* want to work at an organisation that welcomes their gender identity. They're not alone. An inclusive workplace is a priority for most Millennial and Gen Z folks.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Marti avoids any job advertisements that don't include specific welcome statements for LGBTQI+ applicants, such as "we welcome people of all genders, abilities and backgrounds to apply."

They discover the perfect role in a major engineering firm, which, in response to skills shortages and difficulties in attracting talent, has been actively working to apply an intersectional lens to identify and remove barriers for employees across all areas of the employee life cycle, particularly recruitment. The firm knows this will not only help them attract the best candidates, but also help build a fairer and more equitable workplace in their historically White and male-dominated field. By the time the job advertisement makes its way into Marti's hands, the firm has already trained their staff in inclusive language and unconscious bias and ensured their hiring panel reflects the diversity of their organisation. Marti applies and is selected. They could not be more thrilled to start their new role. And as one of the most talented graduates in their year, Marti's engineering firm is lucky to have them.

Jennifer, 39

And as for Jennifer, her council was soon affected by changing workplace legislation, which required progress on gender equality to be audited and reported on, through an intersectional lens. The initial baseline report was telling. It revealed deep inequities in outcomes — but also in the workplace culture itself, and the attitudes, policies, and processes within the organisation. Jennifer's council enlisted the advice of external experts, who showed them practical things they could do to shift these troubling statistics. They introduced more flexibility into their workplace policies and an additional policy to support carers. They introduced targets for gender equity in leadership and decision making, and a 'zero-tolerance' policy for workplace sexual harassment — which is statistically higher in rural workplaces.⁴⁹

Jennifer and Angela begin to believe that their organisation really can support them as leaders and decide to jointly apply for a new management position. To their delight, they're accepted, and now co-share a role. Their combined decades of expertise, and collaborative and approachable leadership style, is considered immensely valuable to the strategic success of their department. But that's not the only thing that changes. When Jennifer's promoted, she and her husband, Steve, have difficult conversations about the division of labour within their household. Steve hires additional help on the farm, which enables him to spend part of the week looking after their three children. It turns out, he loves being around more to watch his kids grow up. And their whole family is happier because of it.



YOUR WORKPLACE

—A site for positive social change

We know that diverse and inclusive workforces drive innovation. We know that they are positively correlated with wellbeing, staff retention, productivity,⁵⁰ improved decision-making, and much more.⁵¹ Yet, despite decades of initiatives to advance gender equality and inclusion in the workplace, the pattern remains that fewer women are rising through the ranks to senior positions. As McKinsey reports, in the wake of the pandemic and the social upheavals of recent years, companies are struggling to hold on to the relatively few women leaders they have. And all these dynamics are even more pronounced for women who experience multiple forms of marginalisation.⁵²

In the face of all of this — is intersectionality the answer?

While there's no magic solution, intersectionality can be an incredibly powerful tool to deeply understand inequality and discrimination, including how it operates, is perpetuated, and can be dismantled. And when we better understand the nuances of the discrimination and oppression that people face, in all its complexity, we can apply better strategies, to achieve the outcomes we seek.

The truth is, while we often like to consider politics as separate from the workplace, everything we do is political. If we've learnt anything from the lessons that Crenshaw and others have taught us, it's that the systems and structures around us are far from neutral. Without sustained, long-term work to analyse and challenge these, and the barriers to access and success that they pose, discrimination and oppression will remain 'hidden in plain sight' — including in our workplaces.

While this might sound confronting, and it is, it can also be hopeful and inspiring. Because in showing us how these systems of oppression are upheld — it points the way to practical and concrete ways they can be dismantled — and in the process, exposes our workplaces as sites of radical social change. It shows us how 'systems change', which can seem complex and overwhelming, is in fact made up of many actions, including small, daily ones, and mindset shifts, which can combine to radically reimagine our world and our workplaces. And importantly, in re-framing our work in this area, to operate from the margins to the centre, it shows us how removing the barriers that affect the most marginalised individuals, benefits us all. And we think that's truly something worth fighting for.

—Intersectionality matters

CONCLUSION



When Kimberlé Crenshaw and many others developed the concept that became intersectionality, it's probably safe to say that they had no idea it would one day occupy such a prominent place in popular culture and political and social commentary. But, while Crenshaw and others have agreed that this was never meant to be about mere 'identity politics', it remains an extremely helpful (dare we say — revolutionary) framework for seeing, understanding, and challenging discrimination and inequality, and the complex structures and systems that maintain them.



Here at EQI, we embed intersectionality in all that we do. And it brings us great joy to be able to support others in doing the same. We hope that you've learnt something new whilst reading this paper, and that you have gained a deeper understanding of intersectionality, including its history, and how it can be applied to build cultures of inclusion and belonging. And we hope you'll actively work to embed an intersectional lens across your diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to ensure your solutions go beyond single-issue inclusion and drive real change.

Importantly, we wanted to shine a light on the incredible Black feminist thinkers and revolutionaries who developed this work. Our work in this area stands on the shoulders of giants — from Sojourner Truth to the Combahee River Collective, to Patricia Hill Collins, and the many Global South and Chicana feminists who developed similar and contributing ideas and more — and, of course, to Kimberlé Crenshaw herself. This theory was forged in a radical politics of survival and liberation, which goes much deeper than simply being about representation, diversity, equity, or inclusion. We wouldn't leave home without it — and neither should you.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We help organisations achieve equality at work.

Are you looking for support with your DEI efforts? Do you want to see lasting change in your organisation? We can help.

As you now know, achieving gender-equal and inclusive workplaces requires a transformative approach that changes systems, structures, and social norms, rather than piece-meal efforts. With Equality at Work, by The Equality Institute, we support and empower workplaces through transformative DEI solutions. Through a suite of integrated products and services that include diagnostics; leadership buy in; education and culture change; progress reviews and monitoring; and policy review.

Our holistic approach includes:



EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

- ◆ World-leading expertise
- ◆ Transformative technology
- ◆ Up-to-date and interactive content
- ◆ Expert design



TAILORED SUPPORT TO ORGANISATIONS

- ◆ Bespoke training and diagnostic assessments
- ◆ Training of trainers packages
- ◆ Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs)
- ◆ Masterclasses



Equality At Work

1. Positive behaviour change
2. Cultures of conscious inclusion
3. Improved employee retention
4. Increased productivity and innovation

If your organisation is committed to leading positive social change, contact us equalityatwork@equalityinstitute.org

Referrals

If you're feeling affected by this paper and require support, please contact:

- ◆ 1800 RESPECT (1800 767 732) 1800respect.org.au
- ◆ Safe Steps (1800 015 188) safesteps.org.au
- ◆ MensLine (1300 789 978) mensline.org.au
- ◆ Q—Life 1800 184 527 qlife.org.au

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Positionality Statements

Katherine Lim (she/her) is a Chinese-Australian creative social change practitioner, research translator and storyteller born and raised on Gadigal and Dharug Country (Sydney, Australia), currently based on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung country (Melbourne Australia). Her work draws from over 15 years’ experience in international development, women’s rights, communications and creative arts across Australia, South-East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East, and a practice of ongoing immersive learning in spirituality, activism, and the arts. As a neurodivergent woman of colour, with lived experiences of both privilege and marginalisation, Katherine is committed to applying decolonising and intersectional feminist methods in her life and work, often through using the creative, transformational, and unexpected to create connections between diverse lived experiences, disciplines, and worlds.

Domini Marshall (she/her) is a queer woman and White, Australian-born settler of English, Scottish and Irish immigrants, who grew up on Whadjuk Nyoongar Country (Perth, WA). She currently lives on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country in Naarm (Melbourne, VIC). With a background as a filmmaker and writer, Domini believes in the power of storytelling to transform social norms and attitudes, and advance equality. She has worked in communications for 15 years and is the Director of Brand and Communications at The Equality Institute.

Shannon Harmer (Shan, pronouns she/her) is a White, queer woman born and raised on Wurrundjeri Woi Wurrung Country, where she is also currently based. Shan is the Workplace Equality Lead at The Equality Institute and is currently completing her PhD (almost there!) in feminist peace research. Many years ago, as a young single mother, Shan learnt the hard way about the types of discrimination that some women face. She has since spent the last 20 years of her working life actively seeking to challenge systems of power and discrimination in different countries and contexts, primarily in the international development and humanitarian sector. Through these experiences and her own critical reflection, Shan recognises that she holds power as a White, educated woman of settler descent in Australia, and benefits, at the expense of others, from the very systems she seeks to dismantle.

Somali Cerise (she/her) is a queer woman of colour, born and raised in the UK, India, and Whadjuk Nyoongar Country (Perth, WA), to Indian parents. She currently lives on Dharawal land (Illawarra, NSW) and is a mother to three young children. With a background in gender equality and human rights, Somali has worked globally for the last 20+ years to challenge and transform systems of inequality and disadvantage. She is currently a Strategic Advisor at The Equality Institute.

Read more about positioning identity and why it’s important to us, [here](#).

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