

A research brief on

Intersectionality and the implications for workplace gender equity

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Overview

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how individuals are differently impacted by inequality on the basis of factors such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, citizenship, ability, and sexual orientation.¹ Intersectional inequality affects women and visible minorities differently, depending on their social, cultural, and occupational contexts.² Evidence suggests that many organizational initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion tend to benefit white women in particular, and not other under-represented groups.³

Consequences of intersectional inequality in the workforce

We can see unequal workplace outcomes on the basis of intersectionality in the gendered and racialized wage gap in Canada. Visible minority women, especially first-generation immigrants, earn on average \$5,000 less than non-visible minority women, and \$7,000 less than visible minority men.⁴ Compared to any other group, immigrant women—and those from racialized backgrounds—are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed in jobs that do not reflect their education or experience.⁵ And spending long periods of time in precarious work can have lasting negative effects on the employment outcomes of racialized immigrant women.⁶

Visible minority women are more frequently employed in precarious jobs characterized by insecurity, low wages, low protection, and limited benefits.⁷ Poverty rates for visible minority families are three times higher than for non-visible minority families, and families who identify as Arab, West Asian, and Korean have poverty rates above 30%.⁸

Research has documented other types of intersectional inequalities in the workplace. For example, white men often experience a “glass escalator” when working in female-dominated occupations such as nursing and teaching, that enables their promotion through the ranks more quickly.⁹ However the same benefits do not extend to visible minority men; Black male nurses are perceived as less skilled than female nurses.¹⁰

Inequality affects individuals differently on the basis of factors such as race, age, or gender

Solutions to overcoming intersectional inequalities at work

Some of the traditional methods for addressing organization diversity are not sufficient for addressing intersectional inequalities. For example, bias training in the workplace can create backlash if trainees resent being selected for training and perceive it as punishment for prior behaviour.¹¹

Management can consider some of the following recommendations as starting points:

Be specific in language use

"Diversity" has become a catchall phrase that can be misappropriated, to mean, for example, hiring in order to achieve "diversity of thought," which may preclude the hiring of women and visible minorities. Management can focus explicitly on addressing gender and racial/ethnic discrimination.¹²

Promote sponsorship over mentorship

In sponsorship relationships, mentors typically go beyond providing advice and use their influence to advocate to executives on behalf of their mentee. But high-potential women are over-mentored and under-sponsored relative to their male peers, and subsequently do not advance as quickly up the ranks. Management can ensure that white male sponsors take on female and visible minority sponsees.¹³

Get buy-in from management

Diversity initiatives are more effective when they engage managers in solving problems of underrepresentation, and increase managers' on-the-job contact with female and visible minority workers.¹⁴ Such initiatives should include fostering acceptance and understanding of accents, and of religious differences, two common but overlooked forms of discrimination.¹⁵

Track data on employee demographics

Many firms do not collect data on the diversity of their employees.¹⁶ This oversight makes it harder to identify underrepresentation along the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and sexuality. By tracking demographic data, firms can better determine whether and how they need to alter practices to mitigate discriminatory behaviour.

Move beyond your usual networks for recruitment and hiring

Management can post job listings on job sites geared towards helping underrepresented groups find employment, such as The Aboriginal Job Board.¹⁷

View this brief on our website:

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

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