

Fact Sheet

Intersectionality

AVERT
FAMILY VIOLENCE



**Collaborative Responses in
the Family Law System**



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Fact Sheet – Intersectionality

What is intersectionality?

Although there are many elaborate definitions of intersectionality, the Ontario Human Rights Commission offers a very simple description:

"...multiple forms of discrimination occurring simultaneously".ⁱ

Pru Goward, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner (2001-2006) explains further:

"By intersectionality, we refer to the connection between aspects of identity, and by 'intersectional discrimination', the different types of discrimination or disadvantage that compound on each other and are inseparable... An intersectional approach asserts that speaking about race in isolation from other aspects of identity results in concrete disadvantage... Intersectional discrimination means people are discriminated against in qualitatively different ways as a consequence of the combination of their individual characteristics."ⁱⁱ

The women's movement of the late 60s and 70s brought the issue of intersectionality into sharp focus. Women were convening all over the country to talk about oppression and demand their rights to equal treatment. It did not take long however, to recognize that the experience of oppression as talked about by the leaders of the women's movement - white, middle class women – did not reflect the way that black women experienced oppression. The voices of black women were joined by women with disabilities, poor women and women from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds, all saying that their struggles and oppression were not represented in the stories of white women. They demanded that the struggles of all women be acknowledged.

Why is intersectionality important?

Intersectional analysis is useful to expose the diversity that characterises otherwise seemingly homogeneous groups and highlight the multiple experiences and interests of their members. This applies to all categories and groups, including men/women, nations/minorities, religions and beliefs, disabled/able-bodied, feminist and anti-racism movements etc... It helps us to avoid imposing fixed interpretations of experience and invites a more sophisticated, responsive approach.

Intersectionality has important implications particularly with regard to ethnic groups and minorities. While it is important to promote opportunities for members of all ethnic groups to enjoy their unique culture and practice their religion, this should not be done in a manner which makes possible the violation of fundamental human rights of individual members of that community.

Similarly, the feminist movement is impelled to acknowledge and reflect upon the breadth of diversity of women, to advocate the interests and rights of all subsets of women, including



disabled women and immigrant women. And the anti-racism community is urged to recognise the importance of mainstreaming gender comprehensively in its work.

Intersectional analysis brings forth new information on different experiences *within* social groups and how different aspects of identity interact. It enables the designing of policies that can be more specifically targeted and applied. The intersectional effects of family violence policy can be analysed by asking questions such as “what does this mean to women/men”, “what does this mean to disabled women/men”, “what does this mean to Aboriginal women/men?” etc.

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks critiqued the issues, saying that white women have assumed positions of authority on the oppression of women and that systems of racism, classism and educational elitism enable them to maintain these authoritative positions. hooks further illustrates her point when examining black male sexism and white female racism. These two phenomena demonstrate how the “isms” can intersect and hamper a clearer understanding of the nature of oppression. She states that as *“long as these two groups or any group defines liberation as gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in continued exploitation and oppression of others”*.ⁱⁱⁱ

And so we come full circle back to *power*. If we want to merely change places with the existing power group in order to gain hierarchical authority, rather than seek to understand multiple intersecting experiences, very little substantive change will occur and perhaps none that moves us towards an equitable and inclusive environment.

ⁱ Toward a Commission Policy on Gender Identity. Ontario Human Rights Commission. October 1999

ⁱⁱ Pru Goward. Speech to “Beyond Racism” conference, Sydney, Australia. March 12-13 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ bell hooks.(1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, Boston: South End Press. p.15