



Understanding intersectionality

A workbook for enhancing women's services

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Introduction

Understanding intersectionality is important if we are to provide the best possible services to women.

We have created this workbook to assist you and your agency expand your knowledge and skills in this area. Especially for those of us from the dominant culture, learning about intersectionality, power, privilege and oppression is a lifelong process.

What is intersectionality?

The word intersectionality describes the complex reality of being human. Each of us is shaped by multiple social or cultural identities that affect how we understand ourselves, the barriers and opportunities we have had presented to us, our abilities to respond to those barriers and opportunities and the way other people respond to us.

As the Learning Network put it in their October 2015 newsletter on intersectionality:

Intersectionality is made up of 3 basic building blocks: social identities, systems of oppression and the ways in which they intersect.

Understanding ourselves & our clients

We need to understand our own social identity and the systems of oppression (and privilege) that have shaped who we are, so we can be aware of biases we may bring into our work. Especially for those of us from the dominant culture, this can be a difficult task. For all of us, it is an ongoing responsibility; something we need to be aware of throughout our working life.

Once we have started learning about who we are, we need to understand the intersectionality of each of the women we serve.

Our social identity is based on the cultures we belong to. Some people use the word groups or communities instead of cultures; in this context they all mean the same thing.

Some examples of cultures to which we may belong are:

- Race
- Class
- Religion
- Skin colour
- Age
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Geographic location
- Legal status in Canada
- Indigeneity
- Education
- Language
- Health (physical, mental, emotional)
- Disability
- Family status

This is not intended to be a complete list.

Make a list of the
cultures you identify with.



Our cultural groupings are associated with both oppressions and privileges.

Make a list of the oppressions and privileges you experience as a result of the cultures you just listed.

Both oppressions and privileges exist within larger societal forces and structures that reinforce notions of us and them, insiders and outsiders, and that ultimately exclude some people and include others. Some examples of these structures are colonization, legal systems, the education system and capitalism, but there are more.

Make a list of the social structures that have contributed to whether you feel like an insider or an outsider.

It is important to understand the intersectionality of people's experiences, because they are complex and have an impact on every aspect of their lives.

For example, you may have an older white woman as a client. She has privileges because of her skin colour but oppressions because of her age and the social structures that have an impact on people as they get older. You need to understand this to serve her well. She may have felt very privileged all of her life and may now be struggling to understand why she feels excluded; why she feels like an outsider.

Or, you may be working with a woman of colour who has come from an economically privileged background. She may exhibit many characteristics of that economic privilege – she may act in a very entitled way, she may be judgmental about people who are less economically advantaged – but because of her skin colour, she has also experienced the oppression of racism. To see her only as privileged because of her economic privilege denies her intersectional reality and means you miss identifying and responding to the oppression of racism that is part of who she is.

Make a list of three of your recent clients and identify their intersectionalities (both oppressions and privileges).

Social or cultural identity both opens and closes doors for women who need to access services related to the abuse they have experienced.

Sometimes, the door is closed because of internal factors: a woman who has high social status may be too embarrassed to seek out services because she does not want anyone to know about the abuse. Or, it may be because of external factors: a woman living in a rural community may not have access to a shelter near where she lives; an Indigenous woman may fear systemic racism will be directed at her or her abuser if she calls the police.

We need to remember that the intersectionality of women's lives affects the trauma they experience as a result of their partner's abuse. Resiliency, too, is related to women's cultural or social identity.

Charting social/cultural identity

The charts that follow set out a number of individual social/cultural identities and the barriers related to them that can affect the experience of abuse and the options available to a woman.

Using these charts, identify ways in which the cultural identities of your three clients have affected their ability to access services and supports. Be as specific as possible.

- What impact have the barriers related to the cultural identity had on each woman?
- Are there other barriers within that social location that you are aware of for this woman? If so, add it to the chart.
- Are there other cultural identities that your clients experience? Use the blank charts to explore these locations. What are the barriers and impacts related to them?

Remember that the women you work with do not just fit in *one* of these charts. Think about additional complexities as you consider the intersections of the many charts a woman may occupy.

Social/cultural location: RURAL COMMUNITIES	
Barriers	Impacts
Distance	
Lack of transportation	
Lack of services	
Few lawyers	
Isolation	
Lack of privacy	
Economic conditions	
Guns	

Social/cultural location: INDIGENEITY	
Barriers	Impacts
Legacy of colonization	
Residential schools program	
1960's scoop of children	
Ongoing racism	
Ongoing poverty	
Lack of on-reserve housing	
Jurisdictional issues	

Social/cultural location: AGE	
Barriers	Impacts
Traditional values about marriage	
Gender role stereotypes	
Co-dependency	
Health issues	
Ageism	
Family attitudes	
Lack of services and resources	
Lack of understanding of elder abuse within domestic abuse	
Kinds of intimate abuse that affect younger women (e.g. technology)	

Social/cultural location: RACE	
Barriers	Impacts
Racism	
Race-based assumptions about attitudes to partner abuse	
Fear of police/CAS/other systemic responses to VAW	
Community pressures	

Social/cultural location: INCOME	
Barriers	Impacts
Lack of employment	
Lack of access to legal representation	
Housing	
Social status	

Social/cultural location: IMMIGRATION STATUS	
Barriers	Impacts
Isolation	
Language barriers	
Uncertain or unknown legal status in Canada	
Lack of knowledge about Canadian laws, rights/ responsibilities	

Social/cultural location: DISABILITY	
Barriers	Impacts
Societal bias and ignorance	
Lack of accessible services	
Dependence on a caregiver	
Limited economic options	
Fear of institutionalization	

Social/cultural location: FRANCOPHONE STATUS	
Barriers	Impacts
Lack of services	
Lack of awareness of language rights under the law	

Social/cultural location: SEXUAL ORIENTATION	
Barriers	Impacts
Social stigma	
Homophobia/ lesbophobia	
Lack of understanding of abuse in same-sex relationships	

Social/cultural location: GENDER IDENTITY	
Barriers	Impacts
Social stigma	
Transphobia	
Lack of knowledge of legal rights	

Social/cultural location:	
Barriers	Impacts

Social/cultural location:	
Barriers	Impacts

Making your agency's work more intersectional

The suggestions below are drawn from the [Learning Network's Intersectionality newsletter](#) (Issue 15, October 2015). Many of your agencies no doubt do at least some of this already, but for those who don't, these suggestions may provide a helpful starting point for agency discussions about intersectionality.

- Adapt your mission statement or statement of principles to include a commitment to working within an intersectional framework
- Develop an Intersections Committee to oversee integration of an intersectional framework throughout the agency
- Engage in regular reviews of policies and procedures to ensure they use an intersectional framework
- Require Board members as well as staff to take training in intersectionality and violence against women
- Review and adapt hiring processes to encourage applications from (and hiring of) individuals from cultural groups that have faced historical exclusion and discrimination
- Provide ongoing training for staff about the dimensions of inequality and oppression and how they intersect
- Work collaboratively with other communities to ensure multiple voices and perspectives are included
- Provide time and opportunities for staff to engage in self-reflection about their own social location, points of oppression and privilege and the impact this has on the perspective they bring to the work
- Ensure client feedback includes the opportunity to comment on how well their cultural needs were met

Conclusion

Providing services that acknowledge and understand the intersectional realities of women can be challenging. It requires a willingness by all of us who provide those services to engage in a lifelong process of learning about ourselves as well as about those who turn to our agencies. It also requires commitment and support from the management of our agencies.

However, both the women and children we serve and we ourselves will benefit when we make this commitment.