



Position Statement on Intersectionality

The Alliance

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change is one of the six National Women's Alliances working to promote the views of all Australian women, to ensure our voices are heard in decision-making processes. Harmony Alliance is a member-driven organisation, providing a platform for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to advocate on issues that matter to us.

Reconciliation

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their continuing connections to land, sea, community and culture. We pay our respects to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We recognise that we live and work on the land that always was—and always will be—Aboriginal land.

As an organisation focused primarily on the rights and issues of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, we recognise the ongoing impacts of colonisation and seek to ensure that our work is grounded in respect for the right to self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

We acknowledge that we are among the beneficiaries of settler colonial systems and structures that were built on the legacy of dispossession and institutional racism.

We are committed to actively reflecting on our place and responsibility as Australian women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' rights and self-determination and have developed a Reconciliation Action Plan to embed this commitment across all aspects of our work.

Intersectionality, particularly as it relates to migrant and refugee women, is central to the values and mission of Harmony Alliance. In highlighting the intersectional disadvantages faced by women from migrant and refugee backgrounds and in the spirit of reconciliation, we recognise our relative position of privilege in the context of the dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as well the legacy of institutional and systemic racism.

This Statement

Since the establishment of Harmony Alliance in 2017, we have been working consistently to embed intersectionality in our work, and to develop relevant advice for the wider policy and practice settings. As a first step, we established the Intersectionality Advisory Group (IAG), and a Young Women's Advisory Group (YWAG), to guide the work of the Alliance. Over the past year, we have also been consulting with our members, advisory groups, the Council, and other stakeholders to develop the Alliance's position statement on intersectionality.

This statement is informed by our members' responses to Intersectionality Discussion Paper (January 2020) and earlier discussions within the Alliance on the topic of intersectionality.



It lays out what intersectionality means to us as migrant and refugee women. It is a work in progress as we continue to learn from our members, migrant and refugee women more broadly, and experts in the field.

The statement is envisaged as a basis for a series of live public conversations on the topic of intersectionality as it relates to migrant and refugee women. These conversations will guide the eventual development of a guidance framework for policy and practice.

What is intersectionality?

The term '*intersectionality*' was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article titled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*¹. It was employed to highlight the inadequacy of the single-categorisation framework of anti-discrimination law in the USA. The anti-discrimination law at the time allowed for claims under either gender based or racial discrimination.

Crenshaw argued that the existing legal framework did not capture the discrimination against black women that lies at the intersection of race and sex. Black women's experiences of discrimination, therefore, cannot be equated with the experiences of white women or black men.

This argument also challenged the mainstream feminist and anti-racist movements for conveniently overlooking and excluding the experiences of black women who are discriminated against both on the basis of their skin colour and their sex, simultaneously. Instead, the intersection of race and sex creates unique forms of discrimination for black women, that are qualitatively different from discrimination on either ground separately.

The intersectionality theory recognises that systemic power and privilege produce multiple layers of discrimination and entrenched inequality in a society. It is the systemic, structural, and institutionalised patterns of power and privilege that render individuals and groups at the intersections of historically marginalised and oppressed social categories vulnerable to ongoing and compounded forms of disadvantage and discrimination.

An intersection of multiple forms of systemic discrimination produces greater disadvantage for groups of people who are not dominant and do not have same access to power and privilege as the dominant groups. Even when the systems are not actively discriminatory, structural barriers, such as language, poverty, and migration status can render certain groups of people more disadvantaged than others.

While intersectionality has been widely theorised and debated in scholarly literature, we can find some common strands of discussion. There are three common assumptions that run across the literature²:

1. There is a recognition that all people are characterised simultaneously by multiple social categories and that these categories are interconnected or intertwined.
2. Embedded within each of these categories is a dimension of inequality or power.
3. These categories are properties of the individual as well as characteristics of the social context inhabited by those individuals; as such, categories and their significance may be fluid and dynamic.

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989. 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', Chicago Legal Forum 139.

² Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016. 'Intersectionality in Quantitative Psychological Research: Theoretical and Epistemological Issues', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(2), p. 155–170.



It is crucial to keep the latter point about concurrence of social differences and power hierarchies in mind in order to truly utilise the transformative potential of intersectionality.

While some scholars have focussed on intersectionality as an intersection of identities or personal attributes³, others have criticised this approach and called for a shift from “studying identities and categories to studying processes and systems”⁴ and “to avoid attributing fixed identity groupings to the dynamic processes of positionality and location”⁵.

The latter approach is built upon an understanding of ‘identities’ as socially constructed, mutable, and in flux. These identities or groupings—such as race, gender, citizenship status or nationality—are often constructed by those in power to benefit the dominant and the privileged groups. Harmony Alliance adopts this approach in highlighting the systemic disadvantage and structural barriers faced by women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, while acknowledging our position of relative privilege in the context of dispossession and ongoing colonisation of the First Nations Peoples in Australia.

What does intersectionality mean to us?

Women from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Australia are impacted by multiple forms of systemic and structural disadvantage and inequality. It is not our identities that make us vulnerable but systemic exclusion and histories of oppression that create entrenched forms of disadvantage for us. Intersectional disadvantage affects our participation in civil, economic, social, cultural and political life, and manifests in the form of harmful societal stereotypes and racism.

Migration is a common experience that brings us together. We all have moved to Australia either within our lifetimes or are born to parents who came to Australia as migrants or refugees. Despite this commonality, our experiences are vastly different from each other depending on whether we are first or subsequent generation migrants, the stage of life we migrated at, whether we are recent migrants/refugees, or the various visa pathways we (or our parents) took to be here. The experiences of those amongst us who arrived recently on partner or family visas, for example, are significantly different to those who came here on business visas or were born to parents who were well settled in Australia.

However, migration status alone does not determine our experiences. It intersects with other factors such as our reasons for migration, education and professional qualifications, language skills, ability, age, relationship status, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, family and community connections, skin colour and other visible features, amongst many others. These intersections determine our relative position in the society and the levels of disadvantage we face in accessing equitable life opportunities in our new home country, Australia.

³ Ben Smith, 2016. ‘Intersectional Discrimination and Substantive equality: A comparative and theoretical perspective’, *The Equal Rights Review*, 16(1), p.73.

⁴ Rita Kaur Dhamoon, 2010. ‘Considerations on Mainstreaming Intersectionality’, *Political Research Quarterly*, 64(1), p. 230–243.

⁵ Nira Yuval-Davis, 2006. ‘Intersectionality and Feminist Politics’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 13(3), p. 193-209.



We experience intersectional disadvantage in all spheres of life ranging from our social and community interactions to systemic barriers in accessing employment opportunities, leadership positions, healthcare, and even safety and justice. At a societal level, we face various forms of racism that ranges from overt physical attacks to more subtle and guised interactions in everyday lives. We also have to navigate stereotypical categorisations to be accepted and respected within our various circles—including our own communities and families at times—which often requires suppressing parts of our existence and adopting others that may be detrimental to our well-being.

At a structural level, we face compounding barriers including implicit and explicit bias and complex procedural requirements in accessing equitable opportunities, supports, and services. These structural barriers are supported by systemic discrimination and racism against women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Below we share some examples of such intersectional disadvantage experienced by our members. These examples show that our experiences of intersectional disadvantage lie on a spectrum and can range from frustration and inconvenience to outright discrimination and harm in certain circumstances.

Zara is an Arab Australian woman who migrated here as a child with her family ⁶. Despite being an Australian citizen, having good education and English language skills, she often finds herself having to fight a stigma associated with being an ‘Arab Muslim woman’—that she is suppressed, submissive, dependent on her male family members—to be accepted as an independent, intelligent woman with her own opinions, thoughts, and knowledge to contribute to discussions and to the society. She feels that she “always has to leave some parts of her identity at the door” to be fully accepted in the society. She feels similarly challenged when interacting with her own community where she has to leave some other parts of her independent identity at the door to be fully accepted as a part of the Arab community in Australia.

Reema is a migrant Australian with an Anglo-Indian heritage, and also a member of the LGBTQIA community. She finds herself constantly navigating different communities with different expectations of her and trying to be accepted for her own self rather than belonging to socially defined group identities. Her experiences of disadvantage go beyond the fight for acceptance and affect her ability to access sexual and reproductive health services. Her access to healthcare is negatively impacted not only by the judgements and stereotypes of the communities she is a part of, but also by the implicit bias of the healthcare providers, and a lack of culturally responsive services available for her needs.

Lee is a disabled migrant woman and works in a multicultural sector organisation. Despite her Australian citizenship, university education, and relevant work experience, she would not get interviews when looking for employment in the mainstream sector unless she has a personal connection and the potential employer is familiar with her skills and ability. She feels explicitly discriminated against due to her cultural background and her disability. The discrimination she faces is due to a unique combination of these two factors and cannot be reduced to either/or.

Bisha is a recent migrant from Nepal and has experienced implicit bias when trying to access mental health services. A mental health provider assumed that she needed help because in her culture it was a taboo to talk about certain things and because she did not find an outlet with her family. She found the undermining of her mental health concerns due to assumptions about her cultural background to be detrimental to her well-being and her ability to seek support when needed.

⁶ Real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect personally identifiable details of our members.



Eva came to Australia with her husband and child as a refugee and had very little English language proficiency at the time of arrival. Upon arrival, she was relegated to the task of providing care for the child and looking after the house while her husband learnt English and found a job. After several years of providing caring duties, she could no longer access free English language classes and thus could not seek employment. Eventually when she and her husband both took the citizenship test, she did not pass due to lack of required English language skills and was left further disadvantaged. In this case, her refugee status, her inability to speak English, her gendered caring duties due to her sex and structural barriers—such as time limits on free English language classes and citizenship test policies—together created an ongoing disadvantage.

Suad came to Australia as a refugee from Eritrea. She gained her citizenship over 15 years ago and spoke good English. At one of her workplaces, she was sexually and racially harassed by her supervisor. When she tried to lodge a complaint, she was told that she could lodge a complaint either on the basis of sexual or racial harassment. Her experience of sexual and racial harassment was not understood as a qualitatively different experience than sexual or racial harassment.

These case studies highlight that there are patterns of privilege and disadvantage entrenched within the structures of the social and public spheres that impact the lived experiences of migrant and refugee women in a myriad of ways depending on the specific intersections of their social positions and ascribed identities. While being a migrant or a refugee woman in itself does not necessarily correlate with vulnerability, the intersection of this status with other factors produces various forms of heightened vulnerability.

Intersectionality for us, therefore, means an understanding and recognition of the complexity of our experiences, an appreciation of group identities we self-identify with—without reducing us to any of those identities, and a proactive approach to challenging and addressing systemic inequalities based on hierarchies created and sustained by those in power and privileged positions.

Harmony Alliance believes that in order to achieve positive outcomes for migrant and refugee women in all their diversity, intersectionality should be incorporated in all spheres of policy and practice, from legal rights to provision of services. We encourage and commend the embedding of the principles of intersectionality—including ongoing reflection, substantive representation, and commitment to equity—in policy and practice.