

Women and Intersecting Identities

As American writer and activist Audre Lorde said: *“there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”*¹ Individuals have intersectional identities deriving from social relations, history, and structures of power. An intersectional analysis seeks to unveil the complexity of everyday life and brings to light discrimination that occurs due to the combination of identities.

It is in this context that the topic chosen for this year’s NCPE International Women’s Day Conference is **‘Women and Intersecting Identities’** in view that some groups of people, particularly women, are more prone to intersectional discrimination.

Intersectional discrimination *“happens when two or multiple grounds operate simultaneously and interact in an inseparable manner, producing distinct and specific forms of discrimination.”*² An example of intersectional discrimination *“in the European context concerns Muslim women wearing the headscarf. If only approached from the axis of gender or from the axis of religion/race/ethnicity, discrimination cannot be uncovered, because in the same situation, a woman without a headscarf and a Muslim man would not be subjected to the same type of discrimination.”*³

Indeed, according to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency’s (FRA) survey in 2017, nearly one in three Muslim respondents reported facing discrimination when applying for a job.⁴ Around 35% of Muslim women and 4% of men who looked for work mentioned clothing as a reason for discrimination, while 22% of women and 7% of men mentioned such discrimination when at work.⁵

¹ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/intersecting-inequalities-gender-equality-index>

² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/intersectionality-and-multiple-discrimination#:~:text=Intersectional%20discrimination%20%E2%80%93%20happens%20when%20two,and%20specific%20forms%20of%20discrimination.>

³ https://www.intersectionaljustice.org/img/intersectionality-report-FINAL_yizq4j.pdf

⁴ European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (ed.) (2017b), Second European Union minorities and discrimination survey. Muslims: selected findings, Publications Offices of the European Union, Luxembourg

⁵ Ibid

Besides religion, race and ethnicity may also create particular barriers for women. For instance, research shows how racism economically disadvantaged black people as a group and how sexism further confined black women *“to low-paid, dead-end jobs usually occupied by women.”*⁶

Moreover, women with disabilities are also likely to experience intersectional discrimination. In fact, while all persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, women with disabilities are likely to be poorer than men with disabilities, and they are less likely to be employed. Women with disabilities are also more likely to experience sexual violence in relationships and institutions than men.⁷

Furthermore, intersectional discrimination can also affect women on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. According to a survey published by FRA in 2014, *“lesbian and bisexual women, as well as transgender people, are more likely than gay and bisexual men to have been discriminated against on the basis of their gender.”* Additionally, women respondents were much more likely to say that the last attack *“they experienced was of a sexual nature”*.⁸

With respect to gender and age, more older women than men are at the highest risk of poverty and are less likely to be in employment.⁹ Furthermore, *“while older men can more often counter ageism through intellectual and career achievement and possession of financial resources,”* these attributes are less prevalent in elderly women.

These examples show that social groups are diverse, and that women and men face different challenges. It is also important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of women and men within a social group, which may lead to further differences and distinct circumstances and needs.

In this context, a focus on intersectionality is encouraged as it helps us understand and respond effectively to the real-life experiences of people experiencing discrimination. It is of

⁶ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/intersecting-inequalities-gender-equality-index>

⁷ <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/intersecting-inequalities-gender-equality-index>

⁸ European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (2014), European Union lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survey. Main results, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

⁹ Employment rate (Age group: 50-64) Women: 52% Men: 71%

<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/intersecting-inequalities/age/work>

utmost importance to address the challenges faced by women with different identities to be able to combat inequality and intersectional discrimination.

To address intersectional discrimination and develop an intersectional approach to gender equality, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men recommends that EU Member States raise awareness *“on the definition of intersectional discrimination and disadvantage as well as the benefits of an intersectional approach when addressing gender inequality, stigma, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and violence”*, engage and use opportunities presented by the media to raise awareness on the importance of intersectional analysis in laws and policies, and ensure meaningful consultation and dialogue with civil society organisations.¹⁰

Moreover, the Advisory Committee recommends that EU Member States train researchers, policymakers and equality bodies on data collection and compilation of administrative data and translate an intersectional analysis into practical frameworks. It also recommends that EU Member States incorporate an intersectional perspective when mainstreaming gender equality in all policies and programmes from the design to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes, amongst other recommendations.¹¹

At the national level, this year, the NCPE has chosen to address this theme during its commemoration of the International Women’s Day seeking to raise awareness on women and intersecting identities. The Conference will focus on the difficulties faced by women with different identities, the challenges to address inequality and intersectional discrimination, and what can be done to combat such inequality and discrimination.

The NCPE works to ensure that Maltese society is a society free from any form of discrimination based on sex/gender and family responsibilities, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, racial or ethnic origin, and gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics in employment; banks and financial institutions, as well as education;

¹⁰https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/aid_development_cooperation_fundamental_rights/opinion_in_intersectionality_2020_en_0.pdf

¹¹ Ibid

racial/ethnic origin and gender in the provision of goods and services and their supply; and freedom of movement for workers in the EU. Anyone who believes that s/he has been a victim of discrimination on the basis of the above-mentioned grounds may submit a complaint to the NCPE.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2276 8200 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.

11th February 2022