



Compound discrimination

Organisations are waking up to how intersectionality impacts the workplace

Writing Farah Khalique

When Nadine Campbell, a black businesswoman, first entered corporate life in the early 2000s, she was one of just a few women in the office. She was also one of a handful of people from an ethnic minority. Fast-forward to 2010, she describes an “injection of colour” – mostly men – and a few more women. Today, she says, you can

**PEOPLE FACE
DISCRIMINATION
FROM MULTIPLE
FACTORS**

walk into any agency in London and see a quarter of the workforce being black, female or both. There is still some way to go, however. Companies may have woken up to gender and racial inequality, but the intersection of gender and race is still misunderstood. The theory of intersectionality is that people face discrimination from multiple factors, such as gender, race, sexual orientation and more. Black women are disproportionately affected by this compound discrimination. According to US thought leader YW Boston,

WHAT DOES INTERSECTIONALITY MEAN?

In 1989, US academic Kimberlé Crenshaw used the term in a paper to describe discrimination faced by black women. **The theory of intersectionality is that people are often disadvantaged by multiple forms of oppression, including their race, gender identity, class, sexual orientation, religion and other markers.**

The Columbia University professor once said: “Intersectionality isn’t so much a grand theory, it’s a prism for understanding certain kinds of problems. African American girls are six times more likely to be suspended than white girls – that’s probably a race and a gender problem. It’s not just a race problem, and it’s not just a gender problem.”

a black man and a white woman make \$0.74 and \$0.78 to a white man’s dollar, respectively. Black women, faced with multiple forms of oppression, only make \$0.64. These forms of oppression are numerous and even include factors like the way a black woman wears her hair. The 2017 ‘Good Hair’ Study found that most people surveyed, regardless of race, showed implicit bias against textured hair.

The pattern of intersectionality

Having experienced the impact of intersectionality first-hand, Campbell went on to found ACE Entrepreneurs, a community for diverse entrepreneurs and a champion of women in business.

She explains, “Intersectionality in the workplace happens because it is mostly unconscious, unseen and not spoken about. It is expected, though. As most companies are set up by people of the same race and sex, they are therefore more likely to employ those who reflect themselves. This is an easy way to ensure each candidate ‘fits in’.

“This pattern then continues with the hiring manager and it becomes harder and harder to introduce someone who is different to the rest. In addition to this, the pool of candidates is likely to have a lower percentage of those from a diverse background and so less chance of getting the role. It is a perpetual cycle, until someone is able to break it.”

Those who do break through this barrier face an invisible pressure to fit in. Culture change business Utopia interviewed over 2,000 people across the UK. It found that nearly six in ten black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workers in the UK feel they have to mask part of their identity to fit in at the office.

Melanie Eusebe is the chair and co-founder of the Black British Business Awards. She explains: “There are stereotypes and tropes attached to both ‘black’ and ‘women’, and the combination of those prove challenging in terms of progressing in the workplace.”

Indeed, Cranfield University’s School of

EXPERT ADVICE

“Push for embedding inclusion in everything you do. Don’t relegate it to HR, but figure out how it helps you to achieve your business strategy. Diverse teams are more productive. Give people a voice when they get to the table.” Raafi-Karim Alidina, co-author of *Building an Inclusive Organization*.

“Measure how inclusive your company is in qualitative and quantitative terms. Aim for small learnings every day and changing behaviour over 18 months. Change doesn’t happen overnight.” Aavanti Chopra, consultant at InDiverse.

Management found that while one in ten FTSE companies plans to increase ethnic diversity in the succession pipeline, most focus on general progression rather than on senior management.

A better workplace

Insurance firm Aviva is one example of a FTSE company that is keen to better understand and identify intersectionality in the workplace. Sabina Khanom, head of inclusion at Aviva, says: “We are grappling with this right now. We haven’t solved intersectionality at all; every organisation is struggling with it. The concept has been around much longer in the US than in the UK.”

Aviva offers its employees six resources groups: Pride, Origins, Generations, Carers, Balance and Ability, which are respectively about gender identity and sexuality; celebrating differences in things like race, ethnicity and religion; an intergenerational workforce; supporting carers and parents; gender equality; and health.

Khanom says: “We believe that everyone belongs in every single group – that’s where the intersectionality piece comes in. For example, I’m a woman of a certain age, I have a child, come from an ethnic minority background and have a sexual, as well as gender identity.”

The Black Lives Matter movement prompted Aviva to think harder about its diversity and inclusion strategy. It is currently reviewing the inclusivity of its gender strategy and the diversity of its leadership development programmes.

Khanom says: “An external company [came in to help us] in February. We want to raise the problem of intersectionality, especially with the partners we work with and our clients. You have to think about the recruitment process [through] to promotion and retention, rather than hosting one-off events. How are ethnic minority women being considered through the pipeline? We are having continuous conversations throughout the year about the role of black women and young black men.”

Education is a starting point for many companies, says Aliya Vigor-Robertson. A second-generation immigrant of Kashmiri heritage, she is the founder of JourneyHR, which helps make businesses in the creative and marketing services industry better places to work. Her advice for business leaders is to compile employee data and take it from there.

She says: “Look at your data and see, where is our female and ethnic minority talent going? Do we encourage people to stay? Collect data more efficiently to really measure progress. This is critical as a starting point.”

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