

Unequal Intersections at Work

This paper is the sixth of eight features for EI's campaign "Pay Equity Now". It puts gender pay inequity in the context of other inequalities. The subsequent features will focus on further aspects of this issue, such as legislation and regional disparities.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the intersection of categories such as gender, ethnicity, disability or age which can have specific and mutually interdependent consequences within a particular context. A brief overview of the analytical concept of intersectionality is followed by a short discussion of the gender pay gap against this background. Next, the various discriminatory practices at work are examined. The conclusion is that antidiscrimination policies should not be based on general assumptions about disadvantaged groups but rather should focus on the actual living conditions and differences within those groups.

Introduction

An intersectional approach recognises that discrimination against an individual can fall into various categories such as race, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc.. When those so-called "differentiating axes" or "discrimination categories" are combined in different ways, it is very difficult to predict the resulting discriminatory processes. Furthermore an intersectional analysis does not assume a hierarchy between the different categories. There is not usually a main or fundamental category that takes precedence over the others (for example: being a woman is not more relevant to discriminatory processes than being disabled). The concept of intersectionality therefore attempts to respond to multiple challenges emerging from political strategies which focus on only one differentiating axis (e.g. gender or race or class or sexual orientation or disability). In everyday life full participation in society and its specific areas like employment,

healthcare or education is often limited for many people due to inseparable but diverse categories of inequality. Antidiscrimination and affirmative action policies need to tackle differences between and within socially marginalised groups, so that they don't reproduce stigmatisation and privilege/marginalisation because of insensitivity to the relevant "axes of exclusion" in the specific context.

What is Intersectionality?

The term "intersectionality" can be traced back to Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Professor of Law, who analysed the particular experiences of black women within the legal system. An examination of five court cases showed that the inequality axes of gender and race could not be separated when analysing the causes for and the consequences of discriminatory practices with which the black women were confronted. (Crenshaw 1991) Intersectionality is based on the assumption that "people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history and the operation of structures of power." (WREC 2004:2) At the same time processes of self-identification (e.g. academic) as well as categorisation by society (e.g. disabled person) can encourage or repress experiences of marginalisation and privilege. For instance, working as a teacher in a private school in a wealthy district will present itself quite differently depending on whether a person is identified as black, white or indigenous and a woman or a man. While being white does not lead to any extraordinary reactions in perception and treatment (regarded as mainstream), an indigenous teacher tends to be defined primarily by his/her ethnic minority-background. When the gender dimension is also taken into account, the whole situation might present itself differently again: The possible discriminatory processes do not simply add up (category "woman" plus category "race"), but lead to a variety of potential outcomes. For example, due to the high percentage of women in the teaching profession, an indigenous woman fits better in the picture and therefore might be more welcomed. On the other hand, women of colour tend to be confronted with sexual harassment more often than their white female colleagues. (Ontiveros 1993)

As this example points out, a crucial element of the intersectionality concept is that the simultaneous involvement and integration in multiple categorisations should not be understood as a simple multiplication of inequality conditions.

Furthermore many examples in history of social movements show that fighting for equity and equality within specific areas can reproduce or enhance discrimination for other social groups. This was the case, for example, with the concerns of black women: while the women's rights movement of the 1970's based their political activities on the common ground of the category "woman" (and therefore neglected the specific situation of racial discrimination), the civil rights movement focused exclusively on race, not opening any space for a gender dimension. Black women were never fully represented in either of those two political struggles.

Gendered Intersections in the Working Environment

The existence of a gender pay gap and the differing degrees of that gap in each country or economic region is general knowledge by now. But there is very little information about more specific characteristics within those groups of women and men with regard to ethnicity, citizenship status, age or disability. Furthermore a closer look at the particular form of employment can disclose a particular pay gap in conjunction with actual living conditions. Similarly the family situation is quite important: single parents - most of them are women - are more vulnerable to poverty than two-parent families. (Clement et al. 2009)

Concerning the policy strategies for pay equity, careful consideration of the social position of the target group in the intersecting inequality axes can ensure greater effectiveness. A first step to being able to develop such policies is to gain knowledge about those disadvantaging categorisation processes.

A Closer Analysis: Inequality Categories at the Workplace

Where there is discrimination at work, a variety of factors and structural categories reinforce each other, leading to multiple causes for discriminatory practices and pay differences. In this part of the feature a closer look will be taken at the most influential of these categories, aside from gender (which has already been discussed a length in earlier articles). From an intersectional perspective however, it must always be kept in mind that they constantly impact on each other and usually do not stand alone.

The ILO report “Equality at Work – Tackling the Challenges” from 2007 identifies race (ethnicity), sex and religion as the main long-recognised patterns of discrimination. However, the authors point out that “newer forms of discrimination are being added” (ILO 2007:X) such as unfair treatment of workers due to age, disability, HIV/AIDS or even lifestyle, encompassing issues regarded as unhealthy such as smoking or obesity. As an additional challenge genetic discrimination is mentioned, against people with a genetic predisposition to developing certain diseases.

Race: Racial discrimination has been substantially strengthened by the intensification of labour migration worldwide, being accompanied by anxiety and hostility against both migrant workers and those of foreign origin, who are very likely to work in so-called “3D”-jobs (dirty, dangerous and degrading). (ILO 2007:27) Despite a slow decline in countries that have paid special attention to it (such as Brazil and South Africa), discrimination due to race has proved persistent throughout the globe, although legitimisation strategies might have shifted slightly: “Earlier justifications of racism in terms of the alleged superiority of one culture over another are now joined by arguments based on the need to preserve national identities and cultures from the values and institutions of a different culture.” (ILO 2007:27)

In general, stereotypes regarding race or ethnicity set a vicious circle in motion: Structural unequal treatment and discrimination, as well as socio-economic inequalities, lead to low education and occupational resources. The lower achievements resulting from that in turn nurture ethnic stereotyping, causing unfair treatment, lower wages as well as no promotion prospects. However, as racial discrimination works in various ways and affects every ethnicity differently, here the most common forms of ethnic discrimination are examined separately.

Black people: The ILO report traces first and foremost the persistency of a negative perception of black workers as “lazy, dishonest or violent” (ILO 2007:24). Although black women are usually higher educated than black men, they still fall back behind their male colleagues in terms of pay, which – according to the study writers – leads to a higher proportion of black women in poverty (26,7% compared to 22,8%). (ILO 2007)

Roma: Roma people, the largest ethnic minority group in Europe with about 10 million people, are confronted with massive racial discrimination and stereotyping. According to estimates, the

unemployment rates range between 50 and 90% (especially affecting women), they suffer from poor education and those who reached tertiary education face much lower wage gains and fewer employment opportunities than the majority. (ILO 2007:25)

Indigenous people: Indigenous people are about 15% of the world's poor, although they only account for 5% of the world's population. In Latin America especially, they are more likely to hold informal and unpaid jobs and attain lower education. A large share of the pay gap between indigenous and non-indigenous workers (which amounts to almost 50%) is due to racial discrimination and institutional racism. It mainly consists in "significantly lower wages for the same job, provision of remuneration partially or entirely in kind and delays in payment." (ILO 2007:27)

Religion: The ILO report has discovered increasing discrimination based on religion due to "the deepening of economic inequalities", "the intensification of migration" and "terrorist acts and the adoption of security policies in response." (ILO 2007:33) After 11 September 2001, Muslim workers have suffered from suspicion and discrimination in the industrialised world, ranging from harassment to the employers' refusal to accommodate special religious needs.

Age: By 2030, 110 million people will be aged over 65 (compared to 71 million in 2000) in the European Union. In developing countries the share of people over 60 is growing fast. Age discrimination works in two ways, as it "affects both ends of the age spectrum, although its manifestations and the reasons leading to it differ depending on whether younger or older workers are concerned." (ILO 2007:38)

Sexual Orientation: Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation occurs when a person suffers from verbal, psychological or physical violence. In the workplace lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people are confronted with the refusal of employment, harassment, the denial of benefits to the same sex partner or self exclusion (avoiding certain jobs for fear of discrimination). Homosexuality is even illegal in many States around the world and severely punished.

Disability: Statistics indicate that approximately 650 million people (10% of the world's population) live with a physical or mental disability, of which almost 80% live in developing countries. While only around 5% are born with a disability, the majority of disabilities are acquired after the age of 16 (and mainly during working life). The ILO report states that worldwide the employment and activity rates of disabled people are significantly below average due to social and institutional barriers and hindered access to educational or developmental resources. A French survey shows that less than 2% of the CVs that mention disabilities lead to a job interview (ILO 2010).

Conclusion

The diversity of the categories of inequality mentioned above and their multiple inter-linkages raises the question of how to achieve an intersectional approach. Although the different layers of discriminatory processes are too complex to address with effective political measures, there are useful indicators:

First of all policy makers should internalise the assumption of concurrently effective categories. Someone's life situation can always be characterised as multi-faceted: for instance specific gender, age and sexual orientation characteristics are the "hard facts" of a person embedded in familial and cultural socialisation as well as a certain occupational position and level of education. All these personal dimensions lead to a unique interdependency which can – but not inevitably – lead to unexpected discrimination.

Second, an intersectional approach should include a twofold strategy: On the one side political activities need to be directed at specific target groups such as women, disabled persons or immigrants, otherwise their effort would have no impact. On the other side a closer look should be taken at the differences within those groups. A few examples: Women have different demands depending on whether they are employed on part-time, full-time, on a temporary or permanent basis, or stay at home. People with mental and/or physical disabilities face quite diverse needs as well as societal impairments. The country of origin and the associated cultural characteristics can confront immigrants with varying opportunities and problems.

Thirdly, when developing new political strategies and measurements the target group should be defined on the basis of a thorough examination of the structural categories involved and the specific needs arising from these. The assumption that one inequality dimension is the most relevant in a given policy context without the feedback of the persons concerned can lead to ineffective measures. Regarding the gender pay gap in the teaching profession, age, race or diverse job requirements within different education levels are particularly important factors to be considered.

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