Understanding **Intersectionality**

BITE SIZE GUIDE

CORNERSTONE TOWER HAMLETS

RESOLVE EVOLVE

thcvs Council for Voluntary Service

Overview

This bitesize resource is designed to support public sector staff in addressing inequalities through understanding protected characteristics. It shows how to strengthen resident voice through community engagement and coproduction, in order to influence policy development, commissioning, service design, and delivery approaches. It focuses on enabling staff to explore how to create a partnership with residents and community organisations representing people with lived experience, who can give insights into how to make services more targeted and cost effective. It also seeks to inform the ways partners can effectively work together and in collaboration with public sector bodies

This bitesize guide, Understanding Intersectionality, is part of a series of four bitesize guides that summarise the key points from the Cornerstone Good Practice Guide on developing inclusive Equality Impact Assessments into a more accessible format:

1. Strengthening resident voice.
2. Unlocking the true power of coproduction.
3. Understanding intersectionality.
4. Protected characteristics and beyond.

The Tower Hamlets Cornerstone Project

The Tower Hamlets Cornerstone Project is a partnership between Tower Hamlets Council for Voluntary Service (THCVS) the infrastructure organisation supporting the voluntary sector in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and six community organisations representing protected characteristics.

The two-year project, funded by The National Lottery, developed an approach to influence more inclusive decision-making across public sector agencies in Tower Hamlets. The project created a model for voluntary sector partnership for public sector bodies wanting to work with local communities to address inequalities within policy making services in Tower Hamlets. The continuing goal is to ensure that all residents benefit from improved planning and decision-making that better reflects the experiences and needs of disadvantaged and marginalised communities across London.

The project developed a **Good Practice Guide** to support council and NHS officers to undertake inclusive Equality Impact Assessment: , in order to raise awareness and improve the visibility and understanding of the different equalities' issues and experiences across our communities through practical, lived understanding of intersectionality and how this applies to residents.

As part of strengthening resident voice, through raising awareness with communities, the project developed a leaflet for residents in **English**, **Somali** and **Bengali**, both as a written and **audio resource**.

Introduction

This guide is designed to help those carrying out Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) understand the importance of intersectionality in the process. It recognises that people's experiences are shaped by more than one characteristic at a time, which can create unique forms of disadvantage or discrimination, impacting on access and the needs within services.

By taking an intersectional approach, organisations can strengthen their EqIAs and ensure their decisions are better informed, fairer, and more inclusive.

Sections

1. What is intersectionality?
2. The importance of intersectionality in EqIAs.
3. Discrimination and oppression: How EqIAs can help.
4. Intersections, intersectionality and privilege: The impact on EqIAs
5. Intersectionality in the EqIA process.
6. Conclusion.

Section 1: What is intersectionality?

Summary

- Intersectionality recognises that we are not just one 'characteristic', and allows us to examine and take account of the negative impacts of some intersections in the lives of specific groups.
- The original group considered by Kimberlé Crenshaw were Black, working-class women.
- Though we all have intersections of characteristics, they do not all have negative stereotypes and negative outcomes associated with them.

Defining Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept created by Kimberlé Crenshaw (a Harvard Law Professor at the time).

Quote from Kimberlé Crenshaw:

Intersectionality can be defined as the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines intersectionality as:

'The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups'.

In simple terms, intersectionality is a concept that recognises that as human beings, we are more than a single characteristic or trait. Specifically, as stated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, when specific characteristics intersect and interact with systemic (institutional) discrimination, it can have particularly negative consequences for certain groups.

Kimberlé Crenshaw examined the experiences of Black women in the US in relation to the criminal justice system. Here in the UK, we are using the term intersectionality to describe any 'overlap' of characteristics, but we need to be aware that some intersections do have a particular impact and carry historically negative associations and assumptions.

As an example, a Black woman might be seen only in terms of her colour, but her gender and class (and other aspects of her) will also shape how she is seen, considered and treated. The intersections cannot be separated from the treatment she will receive, which will be different to that of a Black man or a white woman.

Within an EqIA, the simplistic approach of listing the nine protected groups makes it easy to forget that we are considering 'whole' human beings, and the whole human will be interacting with the services or policies. Characteristics such as socioeconomic status, refugee status, and caste (for example) that are not often discussed in relation to policy, processes, or strategic and departmental discussions will also need to be considered.

This is where knowing the local community beyond the expertise acquired by the local authority is invaluable (see section 5). However, we cannot understand these intersections without recognising that we may not realise the impact of their privilege and bias (see section 4).

The Protected Characteristics

These are the nine protected characteristics, which are most commonly referred to in EqIAs.

- **Age.**
- **Disability.**
- **Gender reassignment.**
- **Marriage and civil partnership.**
- **Pregnancy and maternity.**
- **Race.**
- **Religion or philosophical belief.**
- **Sex.**
- **Sexual orientation.**

In Equality Impact Assessments, it is important to go beyond the nine, ideally taking account of class and education, as well as characteristics specifically considered important locally, such as the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, including 'Care experience' as its 10th protected characteristic.

Section 2: The importance of intersectionality in EqIAs

Summary

Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) are about understanding how policies, practices and decisions affect people in different ways. Intersectionality is central to this process because it reminds us that people's lives are shaped by more than one characteristic, with some intersections so commonly linked that they are associated with specific adverse outcomes.

If we ignore the intersections, we risk missing the injustices and policy decisions that create real barriers for communities and individuals and reinforce systems of discrimination, instead of challenging them.

The importance of intersectionality

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality to highlight how Black women were marginalised within both feminist (largely white-led) and anti-racist (largely male-led) movements. Her research showed that racism and sexism did not act separately but combined to create distinct forms of discrimination that were invisible when each was viewed in isolation. This insight - that systems of power and oppression overlap - is at the heart of intersectionality.

For EqIAs, intersectionality matters because it helps us recognise the real disadvantages faced by many, but not 'visible' if thinking just one characteristic at a time. Someone may face barriers not just because of their gender, but also because of race, disability, or low income. These overlapping characteristics can have a powerful and specific effect on opportunities and access to services.

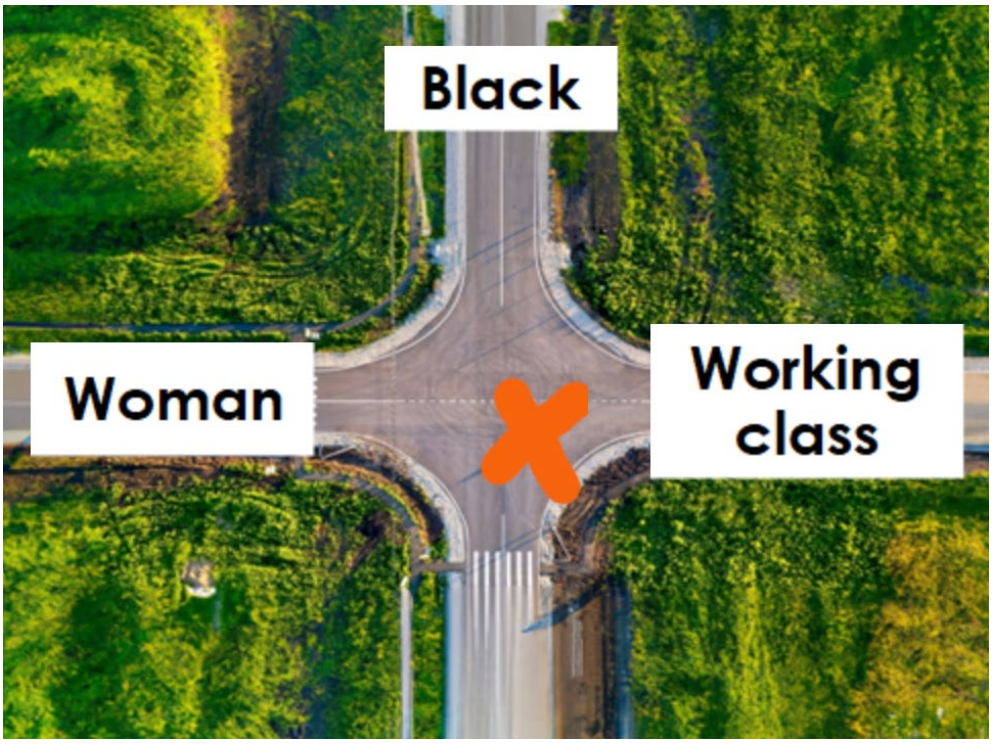
Intersectionality also challenges us to look beyond compliance. It reminds us that inequality is rarely simple, and that assumptions within systems often reinforce exclusion. By building intersectional thinking into EqIAs, we move closer to assessments that reflect the complexity of real lives - making them stronger tools for identifying discrimination and promoting fairness.

Also, the concept of intersectionality does highlight oppression, but it also helps those carrying out EqIAs recognise the intersections that shape everyone's identity and experience. Given that we all live at the intersection of multiple characteristics and circumstances, this influences how we view different groups, their needs, and experiences. Giving intersectionality and the common intersections serious attention strengthens the need for consultation and ensures the outcomes are grounded in lived experience.

The crossroads

Below are the original areas considered by Kimberle Crenshaw.

The X represents the intersection of characteristics that impact how a group of people is treated by society, as noted by Kimberlé. Crenshaw described it as being like the intersection of a crossroads.



Some questions to consider

1. What do your intersections look like?
2. Do they negatively impact what you can do, or affect what you think you can do?
3. Do they impact how comfortable you feel in local spaces or whether or not you feel able to use local services?

Section 3:
Discrimination and oppression: How EqIAs can help

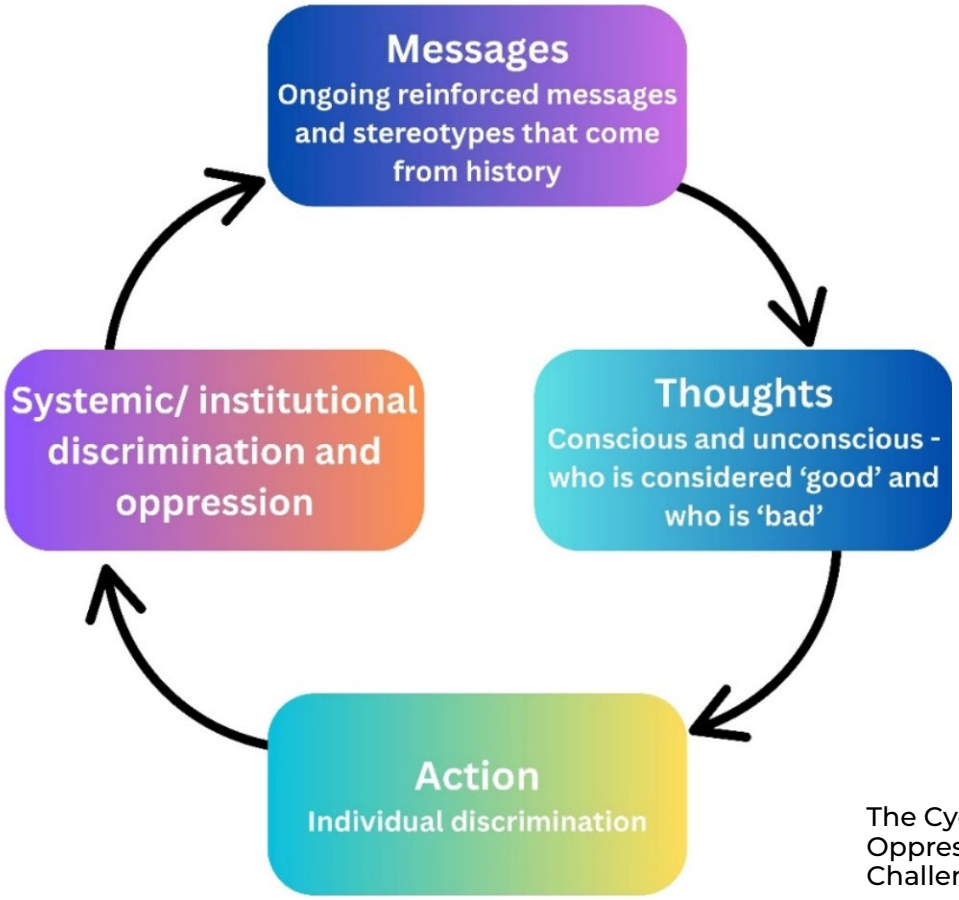
This section reflects on how intersectional and inclusive EqIAs can disrupt cycles of discrimination and oppression.

To fully examine the potential for intersectional considerations when developing EqIAs, it is essential to reflect on how discrimination, social injustice, and oppression become embedded in organisations, and therefore, in policies and practices.

Cycles of Discrimination and Oppression

Throughout history, there have been many examples of discriminatory legislation, organisational practice and state-sanctioned oppression that have led to entrenched prejudice in societal attitudes toward groups with particular characteristics—for example, colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, asylums and the Gross Indecency Act etc.

Below is a diagram of how oppression can become a self-sustaining cycle.



The Cycle based on the Oppression Cycle by Challenge Consultancy.

It is important to note that sometimes, discrimination is overt, conscious and deliberate. Other times, however, discrimination can be unconscious. We all inherit our history, alongside the messages that come with that history. These messages can influence our thoughts and, whether consciously or unconsciously, cause people to separate who is considered 'good' or 'trustworthy' from who is 'bad' or 'to be feared'. These thoughts turn into individual acts of discrimination. These individual acts feed into systemic and institutional discrimination and oppression – it can affect employment practices, the quality and efficiency of healthcare that people receive, and contribute to financial inequality and pay gaps, as a few examples of systemic oppression and discrimination. Here, the cycle repeats itself – institutional oppression generates (and regenerates) the often unchallenged messages we inherit from our history.

Activity: Reflect on how we can disrupt the cycle of discrimination

- How can we change the messages – could this be through education, training, challenging discrimination where you see it?
- How can we address conscious and unconscious forms of discrimination and bias – could this be through inclusive policies and practices, thinking before acting?
- How can we turn thoughts into action – Equality Impact Assessment, consultation, power sharing?
- How do we ensure that we monitor how attitudes are evolving/staying the same – employment, monitoring data, reviewing and updating practices and reports?

How EqIAs can help to break the cycle:

Messages

What are the stereotypes and messages that have been received about this group?
Does the EqIA go beyond those assumptions?
Does it actively challenge?

Thoughts

Does the policy, procedure or strategy clearly set out expectations for inclusive behaviours? Is there explicit messaging that promotes the active inclusion of different groups and challenges underlying assumptions? Unchecked assumptions about groups often shape actions that restrict or reduce access to services.

Action

Are enough voices involved in the EqIA to ensure that all relevant groups are properly considered? Broad and active inclusion - reaching beyond the usual groups or individuals - is essential, as is responding to the concerns and perspectives raised.

Systemic discrimination

Have the potentially difficult messages communicated by the organisation been taken into account? Are there any wider actions, such as training or updates to related policies, that need to be considered to ensure this document or project achieves its intended aims?

Section 4: Intersections, Intersectionality and Privilege

Summary

This section examines how intersectionality and privilege can shape how we live and move through the world.

Reflection

Reflect on the things that you might consider when going:

- on holiday
- to get accommodation
- for a job interview
- out for an evening
- to a hospital appointment

Now reflect on how someone from the below groups might answer the question above:

- Someone who is physically disabled
- Someone who is a Black British man
- Someone who is an Asian British Muslim woman
- Someone who is a transgender man
- Someone who is in a same-gender couple

Did you discover that your experiences are similar? Or different? How do they overlap and intersect?

It is vital to consider how intersections and overlapping characteristics can change the way in which we live and move through the world. To the left is an exercise in thinking critically about how particular intersections of protected characteristics might impact your everyday life.

This exercise can act as a starting point when developing inclusive and intersectional EqIAs.

What might someone have to think about if they embodied two or more of the above demographics?

Based on your answers to the activity, you might find that the experiences of others resemble your own, or you might find that they are very dissimilar. Where one person may have a lot to consider or worry about when going on holiday, finding accommodation, going to a job interview, going out for an evening, or to a hospital appointment, another person might be privileged enough to have fewer concerns.

Privilege refers to the unearned advantages and benefits individuals receive based on their membership in certain social groups, often leading to systemic inequalities.

The cycle of oppression ensures that those who exprerience privilege remain privileged, and that those with (often multiple) marginalised characteristics, remain underserved and unconsidered. It is vital to reflect on intersectionality and privilege in the context of designing EqIAs to disrupt these cycles.

Section 5: Intersectionality in the EqIA process

There are numerous points in the EqIA process where intersectionality can be considered and taken into account.

Consider possible impact: Screening	It is important to think about intersectionality at this early stage - is there any potential intersectional impact? This is more likely if there is also an impact for one or more of the individual characteristics. E.g., if women are less likely to use a service, then are Black women or disabled women even less likely?
How have groups already been considered? Data analysis	When looking at the data, check if it's possible to pull out information across key intersections. If not, note for the action plan for future action on data collection.
Consultation	Who are you going to consult with? What questions are you going to ask? Consider the main intersections with race, gender and class, and consult groups where some of those involved can discuss these intersections based on their life experiences.
Identify action. Potential further screening	Having consulted, identify actions relating to the individual characteristics and include sections on intersectional concerns and Having consulted, identify actions related to individual characteristics and include sections on intersectional concerns, along with short, medium, and longer-term actions. Screen again to ensure these actions do not negatively impact other groups. Screen again to check those actions do not negatively affect other groups
Explain decisions and sign off	Be sure to explain 'why' and also 'why not'. It is vital if community members have taken time to tell their personal stories, explaining the impact on them, that the reasons for not going forward with suggestions andactions is clear both internally and to community groups and members
Timetable the actions - ensure they are in appropriate team/ department action plans and strategies (if longer term). Monitor and update as appropriate.	Ensure there is a clear action plan. If it was difficult to consider intersectionality and disaggregate data intersectionally this time, identify what needs to be put in place in the shorter term to enable proper consideration next time. Also, don't leave the EqIA with no action until the next one, which could be 2-5 years later. Build in check-ins with the relevant team, department or group to monitor changes in population and needs and potential changes to the actions being taken. Where possible, make those changes promptly - avoid waiting for the next EqIA unless it is imminent. This could also make the next EqIA much simpler.

Section 6: Conclusion

Summary and benefits

Taking account of intersectionality in what is sometimes seen as part of an already lengthy process, does require more thought and therefore a little more time. However, it does not need to take a lot of time, as the processes - such as screening and consultation - are already in place; it simply involves a few additional questions and some thinking time.

Having taken the time to consider intersectionality in EqIAs, there are several benefits:

- **Recognising diverse identities:**

Considering the intersecting identities of affected groups is essential. It ensures a more thorough analysis of potential impacts on various groups within the community.

- **Avoids analysis that is too simplistic:**

It helps to prevent an oversimplified analysis. You can treat parents and disability separately, but including disabled parents encourages broader thinking in all relevant areas.

- **Helps to stop the exacerbation of existing inequalities:**

If examining policies or decisions that affect individuals with multiple, often marginalised characteristics, the EqIA can help prevent worsening inequalities.

- **Helps to influence ongoing decision-making:**

When feedback with an intersectional perspective is gathered, decision-makers gain a more comprehensive understanding, which can shape important areas of thinking across various plans in the short-term and into the future.

Key Takeaways

- Including intersectionality in equality impact assessments is essential to ensure communities are fully considered in decision-making.
- Though EqIAs have the potential to disrupt cycles of systemic discrimination and oppression, they also have the potential to perpetuate the cycle.
- Intersectionality can be integrated into the process without difficulty, though it does take consideration, particularly in consultation.

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