

# How-to note



## Intersectionality and safeguarding

For civil society organisations working in humanitarian or development settings

Where possible, measures that aim to prevent or respond to safeguarding risks within the international development and humanitarian sectors should take an intersectional approach. This note outlines: (1) what intersectionality is; (2) why taking an intersectional approach is important and; (3) how to integrate an intersectional approach into safeguarding measures.

### Origins of intersectionality

Intersectionality is a term conceived by African-American feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Her initial work described the way in which African-American women experience different forms of oppression within society.

### What is intersectionality?

- Intersectionality is an approach<sup>i</sup> that can be used to understand the ways in which people experience overlapping – or intersecting – forms of oppression, discrimination and marginalisation based on different aspects of their identity.<sup>ii</sup>
- Intersectionality includes the understanding of: (1) how different aspects of a person's identity relate to their access to power, and; (2) the ways in which these aspects of identity influence each other and reinforce systems of privilege and oppression.
- Intersectionality is most often used to refer to the ways in which women and girls not only face discrimination in the context of global patriarchy, but may have a number of different intersecting identities (e.g. ethnicity, race, disability, education level, sexual orientation, language etc.) which compound their experience of oppression and inequality.
- Intersectional approaches recognise that each person has a number of different intersecting identities. Women and girls, boys and men, or people of other gender identities, are not homogenous groups but are diverse. This diversity means that different individuals have increased or decreased power in relation to one another. Depending on their intersecting identities, women and girls in particular can experience a range of oppressions beyond gender inequality, for example white supremacy,

### Context and time

Although some oppressions are universal, the way in which they play-out differ across time and context. For example, rights, legislation and norms can change over time and from country to country.

colourism, racism, discrimination based on a person's disability, age, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation or sexual identity.

- Individuals facing multiple forms of discrimination due to their intersecting identities have less power in society than others whose identities may give them greater privilege. They may be at increased risk of being targeted for violence, abuse and discrimination by those with more power and they may find it more difficult to access services, find support or solidarity. For example, a woman with a disability may experience patriarchy within disability services and stigmatisation from able-bodied women within women's groups.
- Inequalities based on identity and which are embedded in how organisations or societies operate are referred to as structural inequalities. Structural inequalities impact on the ability of different groups to influence outcomes, access services and resources and these inequalities determine social status. These inequalities are impacted by e.g.:
  - hierarchical power within an organisation
  - power within programmes (between staff and service users)
  - situational power (power differentials between displaced and non-displaced people)

## Why is an intersectional approach important in safeguarding?

- The root cause<sup>iii</sup> of safeguarding incidents is the abuse of power by the perpetrator over the survivor. Organisations can maintain, reinforce and replicate structural inequalities which enable the abuse of power to take place. Structural inequalities can also be maintained simply by a lack of action against those who have abused their power and position.
- It is critical that civil society organisations (CSOs) understand how their organisations are maintaining structural inequalities and the differences in power and privilege amongst the people they are safeguarding. With this, they can put prevention and response measures in place which work for all and foster an organisational culture that celebrates diversity, challenges inequality and prevents harm that can arise from the abuse of power and privilege.
- Taking an intersectional approach in safeguarding will enable CSOs, and actors across the sector, to better understand:
  - Inequalities and the range of safeguarding risks faced by staff and representatives in their full diversity.
  - Inequalities and safeguarding risks faced by people in their full diversity who interact with CSOs during service / programme delivery (e.g. women and girls, community members, children).

- How the organisational culture is reinforcing or dismantling negative uses of power and privilege.

### Some quick tips to guide you

- **Do** widen the perspective. Consider what identity characteristics may be relevant in your context
- **Do** consider how different identity characteristics interact and how this interaction shapes risks
- **Do** use one characteristic as the starting point, e.g. gender identity + other characteristic(s)
- **Do** be guided by your programme focus, location, staff capacity and resources
- **Do** focus on gathering data and analysis that you will use (and then be sure that you use it!)
- **Don't** just include as many identity groups as possible
- **Don't** ignore particular identity groups because they are hard to reach

## Integrating intersectionality into organisational safeguarding measures

### Governance

- Promote diversity and inclusion in the governance bodies in your organisation.
- Support and reinforce accountability from management and senior leadership to ensure implementation of an intersectional approach in safeguarding policies and procedures.

### Culture and leadership

- Recruit leaders, including board members, who represent diverse groups.
- Recruit leaders, including board members, who understand and base policy, procedure and practice on the intersecting risks faced by different people.
- Reward and acknowledge leaders and colleagues who recognise and encourage diversity, acknowledge power and privilege and potential bias and lead or contribute to organisational change.
- Raise awareness and train staff and leaders on intersectionality as a core value of your organisation.

- Create “safe spaces” for specific identity groups to discuss and share their risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH) and other harms and abuses with each other.
- Facilitate safe conversations to challenge existing power structures and the culture within an organisation. Use anonymous intersectional analysis of staff perspectives to inform the conversations.

## Human Resources

- Ensure that leaders, managers and other staff understand how identity characteristics and structural inequalities relate to power and the risks of SEAH and other harms and abuses faced by different staff members.
- Ensure that performance management procedures take into account the risks of SEAH and other harms and abuses faced by different staff members and the need to further train staff and representative (including volunteers) to ensure effectiveness of safeguarding measures.
- Ensure your organisation’s recruitment processes foster diversity and inclusion, and challenge inequality. Read our **safe recruitment tip sheet** for ideas on how to do that.

## Programme cycle

- The design and delivery of a programme and, its safeguarding risk assessment and reporting mechanisms, should be informed in a meaningful way by different groups, including with intersecting risks, within the community or area where you are working and throughout the life-cycle of the project.
- We have developed a separate graphic on how to ensure your programmes take an intersectional approach.

## Reporting systems – communities and staff

- Create safe mechanisms for complaints and whistleblowing that respond to different risks and are accessible to all staff and community members (e.g. considerations of disability, literacy etc).
- Give people who are reporting the option to share their sex, age, race, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, if they wish to and where it is safe to do so. Anonymous reporting can also be an option. Confidentiality and comfort is important. Give people the option to indicate identity factors so that this can inform the update of your risk analysis.

### **Don’t increase risks further!**

You may increase risk of staff or community members by requiring identity details. Make it optional. Do not require information from people just so you can have a more detailed intersectional analysis.

- Map necessary services and their accessibility for all members of a community and staff. Identify services for different population groups, e.g. services for people with certain disabilities, projects for women only, services for women of a specific ethnic group etc.
- Disseminate information on reporting mechanisms to staff and communities in a way that considers diverse backgrounds and needs (e.g. language etc).
- Where possible, gather disaggregated data on the use of the reporting mechanisms (e.g. through an anonymous (staff) survey that breaks down staff age, sex, race, disability and other identity factors).
- Measure the extent to which the different reporting channels are used; the safeguarding risks and if they have changed and / or been well managed; the extent to which all community members or staff understand what to report, why and how; the extent to which all community members or staff understand how they and other staff should behave.
- Analyse aggregated incident figures (not information on specific cases) and identify any trends that align reports and risks with different identity groups.

## Proposal Development

- Refer to how you will take an intersectional approach in the context and risk analysis sections of your proposals to donors. Outline how your approach will be monitored.

## Case handling

- Ensure the case handling risk assessment considers the specific identity characteristics and relating risks of the individual(s) involved in the incident. See our **case handling training package** for more.
- Ensure your organisation has established standard operating procedures and referral pathways where additional support for survivors of SEAH is needed.
- Ensure all staff who are engaged in case handling understand and can apply intersectional analysis.

## Overcoming common challenges

| Challenge                              | Solutions  |
|--|--|
| <b>Staff require technical support</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure adequate training for staff on how to apply a gender analysis and an intersectional approach/conduct intersectional analysis within safeguarding measures.</li> <li>• Link safeguarding training with training on diversity and inclusion so staff can understand how the two complement one another.</li> </ul> |

| Challenge  | Solutions  |
|--|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support staff to understand their conscious and unconscious biases towards different groups, and how to ensure that these are recognised and overcome to safeguard colleagues and those with whom the organisation works.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Leadership do not value taking an intersectional approach</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure leadership in your organisation recognises the impact of power and privilege, their own conscious and unconscious biases and can promote a culture which embraces diversity and challenges inequality.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Reaching all identity groups within one society and engaging with them meaningfully is difficult and time consuming</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building understanding, trust and respectful relations with different groups will take time. This is not a reason to avoid doing it.</li> <li>• Be intentional in the design of programmes and activities to ensure the inclusion of women and girls and diverse identity groups.</li> <li>• Create opportunities for diverse identity groups, in organisations and in communities, to discuss safeguarding concerns and measures that might be taken to safeguard them, e.g. women-only discussion groups.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Safely engaging with people with identities which are not socially acceptable</b>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With communities and workspaces where certain intersecting inequalities are not socially acceptable, more thought should be given to engagement of different groups and the safety of groups and individuals.</li> <li>• It may be dangerous for people from a particular ethnic group or tribe to openly discuss their ethnicity, or LGBTI+ individuals may not wish to 'out' themselves. Engaging with experienced individuals (with relevant lived experience where appropriate or professionals) working within representative CSOs may be useful to provide a perspective on safeguarding measures without putting individuals and communities at risk.</li> </ul> |
| <b>How can we make participation of so many groups meaningful?</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meaningful engagement of different identity groups means that their opinions are heard and influence the design and development of programming.</li> <li>• Working with women and girls and other diverse groups, including those who may be at higher risk of SEAH, means that more effective, bespoke prevention and mitigation can be implemented and that where incidents do take place survivors are able to report.</li> </ul>  |

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<sup>i</sup> Crenshaw, K., (1989), Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989(8)

<sup>ii</sup> Inter-Agency (2019) **Minimum Standards for Gender-based Violence in Emergencies Programming**

<sup>iii</sup> For more information, please see RSH (2021) **Root Causes of Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Sexual Harassment (SEAH)**