

Intersectionality: recognising multiple drivers of violence to improve response

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It is time to expand our frameworks and understanding about domestic and family violence and who it impacts on, particularly during disasters.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a dramatic and lasting effect on people's lives. The pandemic has magnified existing inequalities within society, highlighting gaps and unequal access to resources, services and uneven responses by government. For many, the pandemic has also led to an escalation or onset of domestic and family violence. Yet, while we look for ways to prevent and respond to domestic and family violence within this environment, it is important to interrogate existing frameworks and understandings of violence to explore whether they are relevant and how they apply within this disaster context.

Gender inequality is often regarded as the key driving factor of domestic and family violence. While it is a driver in violence against women, it is not the key driver of all forms of domestic and family violence. It does not explain, for example, why domestic and family violence occurs in LGBTQ+ relationships as well as in heterosexual relationships, against older or ageing sectors of the population and at much higher rates against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women with disabilities. However, the domestic and family violence sector and government continue to highlight that gender inequality is the key, and in many cases, only driver of violence. While it is a critical part of the story and highlights why women are disproportionately affected by domestic and family violence, it fails to paint the whole picture.

Society is built on patriarchal systems, practices and beliefs that generate and rely on unequal power relations. It is these structural inequalities

and power imbalances that reproduce different types of systemic discrimination and violence including sexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, racism, ableism and ageism. These multiple forms of discrimination do not exist in isolation. Where they intersect, we understand this as 'intersectionality'. Intersectional frameworks include systems, structures and social norms within a patriarchal social ecology that create positional and relational power dynamics between people, or groups of people, based on their identities.

While intersectionality has become a policy buzzword in recent years, we are yet to truly embrace intersectional frameworks that enable better understanding and response to domestic and family violence in all its forms. Instead, intersectionality is often included as an 'add on' to existing frameworks. Rather than making practice truly intersectional, we continue to 'other' those for whom these frameworks would be most beneficial by only using intersectionality in situations where the primary framework does not apply. In the process, we minimise the complex power inequalities within society that drive violence in all its forms.

As we look ahead to recovery from the pandemic, questioning who our frameworks are designed to support will be critical. Rather than magnifying existing inequalities, there is genuine opportunity to address domestic and family violence by deeply questioning and addressing the existing complex and intertwined power structures at play within society.