Intersectionality:
Guidance for organisations of persons with disabilities

Introduction

This guidance note provides an overview of the **key issues relating to intersectionality and disability inclusion.** It highlights key considerations for Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) working on this topic.

Intersectionality recognises that society includes **many systems of inequality,** such as norms, practices, attitudes and more, that drive discrimination on the basis of disability, gender, race, ethnicity and so on. Intersectionality highlights that these systems of **discrimination can combine or intersect for people with several marginalised identities to create increased and unique experiences of disadvantage and oppression for them.** Intersectionality identifies and brings focus to these experiences so that the systems of inequality driving combined discrimination can be addressed and **the most marginalised can be better included on an equal basis with others.**

Intersectionality can also be seen as an approach to **look out for who is the most marginalised, explore the intersecting root causes of their disadvantage, and work to address these.** This includes focusing on what our own role might be in upholding or challenging root causes of disadvantage.

Prepared by the Inclusion Advisory Group of CBM Global Disability Inclusion with input from Janine Cruzet (Women with Disabilities Taking Actions on our Reproductive Health and Human Rights Philippines).

All links were correct at the time of publication.

Key issues

Identity

Taking an intersectional approach begins with **considering a person's multiple identities.** These could include any or all of the following:

- Disability
- Gender
- Age
- Geographical location
- Ethnicity
- Race, culture and language
- Sexual orientation
- Religion
- Residency status/citizenship, including asylum/refugee status, legal/illegal immigration status

Power and identities

Intersectionality is not only about identities; it is also about **how these identities relate to the way power is held** or enforced in societies.

Societies' laws, attitudes and norms **favour certain identities over others.** This gives more power to people with those identities. This causes discrimination against **the identities that are given less power.**

For example, **persons with disabilities generally have less power in society than persons without disabilities** due to reduced access to opportunities, services, education, and income, and encountering negative attitudes and other barriers throughout their lives. This means they experience discrimination, sometimes called **'ableism'.**

Marginalised identities or marginalised groups are people belonging to an identity group that is particularly disadvantaged, given less power in society, and/ or discriminated against, for example persons with disabilities.

Systemic discrimination describes the unfair attitudes, norms and practices in society that deny an identity group power and opportunity, causing disadvantage. This occurs for persons with disabilities and other marginalised identity groups.
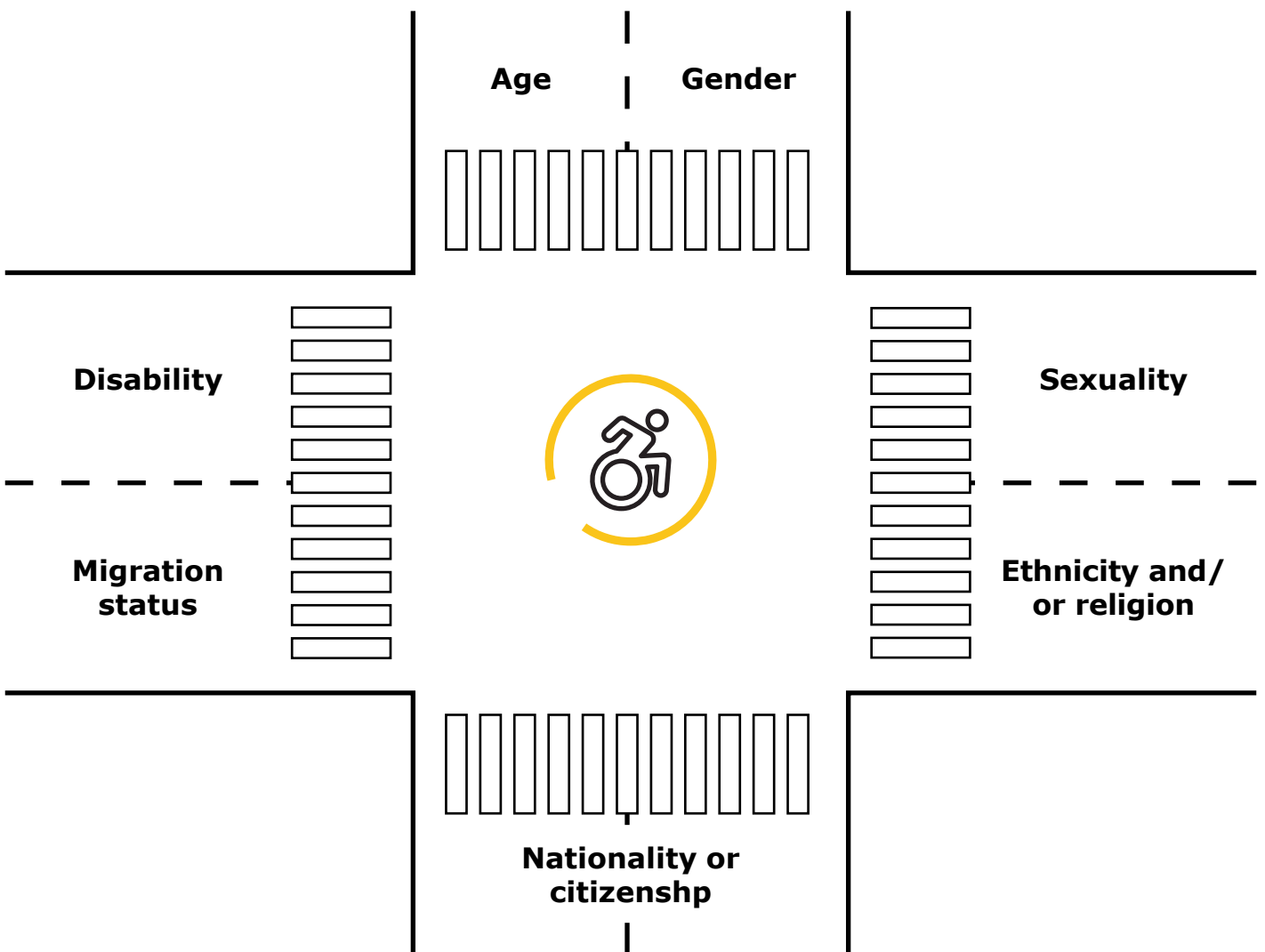
Intersecting discrimination creates increased and unique disadvantages

People have many identities at once, for example based on their gender, age, ethnicity, disability. This means that **the way society treats and gives power to a person also depends on how their identities combine.** Where a person has several marginalised identities, the systemic discriminations they experience 'intersect'. **This is called 'intersectional discrimination'.**

People who experience 'intersectional discrimination' face **unique and increased disadvantages,** due to how society responds to their unique profiles. For example, women with disabilities face specific issues such as forced sterilisation and much higher risks of sexual and physical abuse than either women or men with/without disabilities, due to the intersectional discrimination. They also generally face more disadvantage and barriers around education, employment and access to programs and services than women without disabilities or men with/without disabilities.

Facing these increased and unique types of disadvantages usually means that people experiencing intersectional discrimination are likely to hold much less power - **even within marginalised groups.** For example, **a man with a physical disability in many places may have more opportunities** to influence decision-making or to access employment compared to a Deaf woman from an ethnic minority, or a LGBTQIA+ man with psychosocial disabilities.

This means that people with intersecting marginalised identities are the **most likely to be left behind** or excluded from programs, services, communities, and opportunities.

Age   **Gender**

Disability   **Sexuality**

Migration status   **Ethnicity and/ or religion**

Nationality or citizenshp

Crenshaw describes discrimination to be like traffic travelling along a road. People experiencing intersectional discrimination stand in the middle of the traffic intersection, and so are at much higher risk of being injured by 'cars' or discrimination coming from various directions - or sometimes all of them. We also see that strategies and programming to address certain types of discrimination or inclusion (such as gender or disability inclusion programs), often only focus on the clear sections of road. This means that those standing in the traffic intersections are also more likely to be left behind and remain at greatest risk. [1]

Reaching the most marginalised

An intersectionality approach therefore makes us aware that certain people are at much **greater risk of being highly marginalised.** It calls us to respond to this by:

- Looking out for people experiencing **intersecting forms of discrimination.**

- Including them effectively by getting to the **root cause of why** they are being discriminated against.

  - This involves recognising and exploring the 'drivers of intersectional discrimination': **the systems and norms that keep power away from** people experiencing intersectional discrimination.

- **Addressing these systems and norms that drive intersectional discrimination** in our work, by:

  - **Implementing practices that give more power and safe spaces** to those experiencing intersectional discrimination, and

  - Working in collaboration to **break down intersectional discriminatory** attitudes, systems and norms in order to achieve equity for all.

- **Reflecting on our own practices** and how these might themselves discriminate against marginalised people, particularly those facing intersecting disadvantages, and change this where necessary.

  - For example, what are our attitudes towards persons with disabilities who also have other marginalised identities? What about persons with disabilities with a highly marginalised disability type (such as cognitive or intellectual disabilities?) What efforts are we making to deliberately ensure their inclusion?

Working with others

An intersectionality approach can also help with our work with others:

- **Many donors and other partners use language such as 'intersectionality'** or 'intersectional discrimination', so knowing about this term and concept can be a helpful when engaging with them.

  - Intersectionality is a **strong entry point for raising awareness and advocating** about disability as it highlights the need to ensure disability is considered across all work, including that focusing on other marginalised groups such as with children, women, LGBTQIA+, indigenous people, those in remote areas, etc. We can highlight that those with disabilities within these groups may experience intersectional discrimination and are **at high risk of being left behind unless there are deliberate strategies and resourcing** for their inclusion.

  - Intersectionality can also be used to advocate for **funding and expertise in disability-specific programming** to ensure that they can reach all persons with disabilities adequately, including those with other marginalised identities experiencing intersectional discrimination.

- An intersectional approach also calls us to **collaborate with other rights-based movements,** such as the women's rights movement, LGBTQIA+ movement, children's rights groups, etc.

  - This is because it reminds us that persons with disabilities are represented within all these other groups, that people of all of those other identities are represented within the disability movement, and that **all movements are working with the shared vision of a society where power is shared fairly and equitably without discrimination**. As all rights and empowerment are intertwined, breaking down discriminatory practices and establishing more equity for one rights holder group strengthens rights and equity in society for everyone.

  - Intersectionality also reminds us that it is important that our work is **informed by the lived experience** not only of disability, but also regarding **other intersecting identities and discrimination.** At times this will be best achieved by collaborating with other rights-holder groups to utilise their expertise, inputs and contacts.
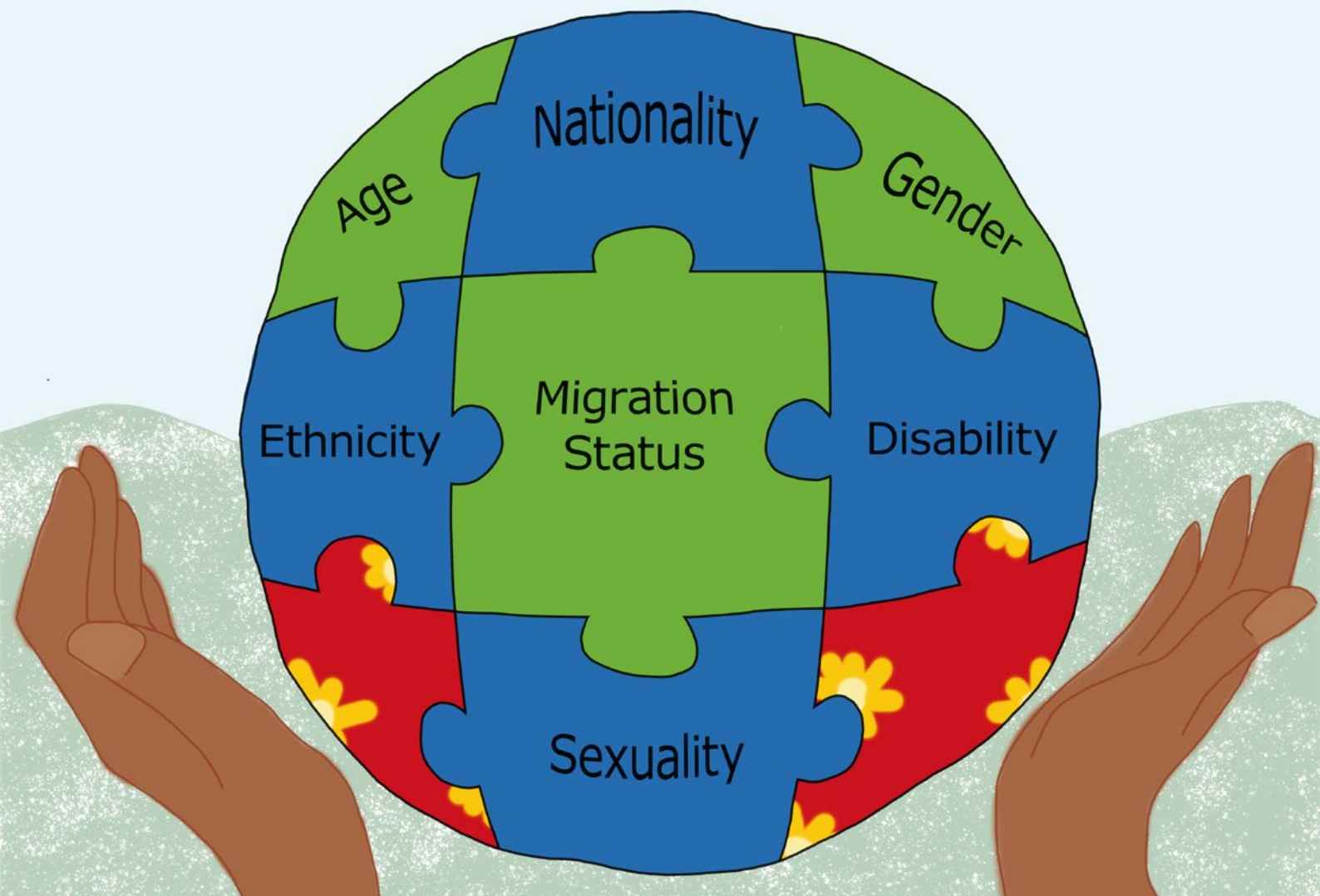
International frameworks on intersectionality

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was the first human rights treaty to recognise **multiple discrimination.**

- Article 6 on the rights of women and girls with disabilities

- Article 7 on children with disabilities

- General Comment No. 6 regarding Article 5 on equality and non-discrimination specifically discusses intersectional discrimination.

Taking action

The following are some **practical steps and actions that can be taken to address marginalisation** for persons with disabilities experiencing intersectional discrimination.

They aim to provide more power and safe spaces, and to **address the root causes of intersectional discrimination.**

- **Conduct in-depth assessments** to understand the diverse identities and experiences within the disability community, including race, gender, sexuality, age, socioeconomic status, and more.

- **Actively encourage leadership opportunities and mentorship programs** for individuals experiencing intersectional discrimination within OPDs.

- **Create safe spaces** for persons with disabilities experiencing intersectional discrimination to engage with processes such as consultations, and/or to access and benefit from services or programs. Prioritise listening to their needs and facilitating this, such as through peer-led consultations and discussions, and channels that allow levels of anonymity.

- **Forge strategic partnerships with organisations representing various marginalised communities,** including women's rights groups, women with disabilities' organisations, LGBTQIA+ organisations, ethnic minority associations, and indigenous rights organisations.

- **Consider the identities and backgrounds of service providers working closely with OPDs,** such as sign language interpreters, counsellors, caregivers and support staff. Implement inclusion strategies in recruitment and hiring processes to ensure that service providers reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

- Reflect upon how OPDs' systems, practices and attitudes may be **causing discrimination or favouring power for certain identity groups.** This may be indirect, unintentional, or the consequence of the way broader society gives certain groups more opportunities (such as men with disabilities over women with disabilities). Regardless, OPDs still can play a part in **responding to and countering such discrimination:**

  - Consider whether any **attitudes or practices** within the OPD towards certain identity groups need to be reflected on, challenged, or responded to in order to ensure better equality and non-discrimination.

  - Consider what strategies OPDs can take to **empower and support** persons with disabilities with other intersecting marginalised identities within OPDs' operations and culture.

  - Develop organisational **policies and procedures explicitly addressing intersectional discrimination** and promoting inclusivity across all the OPDs' operations.

- **Integrate considerations of how other systems of discrimination intersect** with disability when reviewing or inputting into program design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes.

- **Establish platforms for individuals experiencing intersectional discrimination to share their stories,** perspectives, and expertise within OPDs and broader society.

- **Infuse intersectional storytelling and advocacy** into public campaigns, media outreach, and awareness-raising efforts to spotlight the diverse voices and experiences within the disability community.

Resources
and further information

- UN Women, [Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit,](#) 2022

- CBM International, [Disability and Gender Analysis Toolkit,](#) 2020

- UN Women, [Intersectional Feminism: What It Means and Why it Matters,](#) 2022

- International Disability Alliance, [Submission for the CEDAW Committee on the rights of indigenous women and girls,](#) 2021

- JASS, [WE-RISE Toolkit,](#) 2016

- OHCHR, [A Human Rights Based Approach to Data - Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,](#) 2018

- OCHCR, [SDG-CRPD Resource Package,](#) undated

Notes

1   Crenshaw, K. (1989). [Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.](#)