

activism group e.U.

RESEARCH 06

Intersectional Equality

When Inequalities Compound

4 October 2024

Published by activism group e.U.

Abstract

Inequality is often measured one dimension at a time. Income distributions are analysed separately from gender, racial or ethnic disparities; disability is treated as a distinct policy field; migration status, geography and age are commonly introduced as additional variables. This decomposition is analytically convenient, but it can misdescribe how inequality is actually produced. People occupy several social positions simultaneously, and institutions frequently respond to combinations of those positions rather than to each characteristic in isolation.

This study develops an intersectional framework for equality. It begins with the insight, originating in Black feminist legal scholarship, that systems of inequality can interact in ways that are not reducible to the sum of separate disadvantages. Intersectionality is therefore treated not as a catalogue of identities but as a method for analysing relationships among social positions, institutional processes and power. The central proposition is that inequality compounds through mechanisms: differential exposure to risks, unequal access to resources, gatekeeping at institutional thresholds, differences in the conversion of resources into capabilities, cumulative effects across the life course, and the statistical invisibility of small or overlapping groups.¹

The paper distinguishes intersectionality from multiple disadvantage, subgroup disaggregation and generic diversity analysis. It then examines how social class, gender, racialisation, disability, migration status, age and geography interact across labour markets, education, health, housing, public institutions and social participation. Evidence from the European Union, OECD countries and global disability and migration research shows that aggregate averages can conceal sharply different experiences within nominally similar groups. For example, recent European evidence finds higher exposure to racial discrimination among people of African descent who are young, disabled, visibly religious or identify with another minority group; migration outcomes likewise vary substantially by gender, reason for migration, age and duration of stay.²

The paper proposes a Compounding Inequality Model organised around six connected stages - Position, Exposure, Resources, Gateways, Capabilities and Outcomes - situated within the cross-cutting contexts of Time, Place and Power. The framework extends the earlier Equality at Large model by showing why equal treatment along a single dimension can leave compounded inequality intact. The resulting policy implication is not that every social category requires a separate programme. It is that universal institutions must be tested for heterogeneous effects, targeted measures must respond to specific mechanisms

¹Kimberlé Crenshaw, "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, no. 1 (1989): 139–167; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.

²European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Being Black in the EU: Experiences of People of African Descent, Questions & Answers (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023), 5–7; OECD and European Commission, Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), esp. chap. 1 and chap. 2.

rather than labels, and equality policy must address the institutional processes through which disadvantages accumulate and interact.

Keywords: intersectionality; equality; inequality; social class; gender; race; disability; migration; geography; capabilities; discrimination; social mobility; public policy

1. Introduction

The first five studies in this research series considered equality from increasingly specific perspectives. Equality at Large established a multidimensional framework of rights, resources, opportunities, capabilities, participation and outcomes. Social Equality examined how economic resources become conditions of life. Equality of Opportunity investigated how circumstances at birth shape later prospects. Gender Equality and Racial Equality then examined two major dimensions through which social and institutional inequalities are structured.

Each of these dimensions matters in its own right. Yet people do not experience them separately. A low-income woman with a disability does not move between three independent social worlds called class, gender and disability. A highly educated migrant woman may possess substantial human capital while facing constraints associated with immigration status, credential recognition, care responsibilities and labour-market segmentation. A young Black man and an older Black woman may share exposure to racialisation while encountering different risks in policing, employment, health or public space.

Intersectionality emerged precisely because single-axis analysis can render such experiences analytically invisible. Kimberle Crenshaw first used the term to show how anti-discrimination law could fail Black women when race discrimination was conceptualised through Black men and sex discrimination through White women. Her later work on violence against women of colour distinguished structural, political and representational dimensions of intersectionality and demonstrated how immigration status, language, poverty and race could shape exposure to violence and access to support.³⁴

The importance of the concept extends beyond the legal categories from which it emerged. Intersectionality asks whether the effect of one social position depends upon another, whether institutions create distinct experiences at particular intersections, and whether the categories used for analysis correspond to the mechanisms that produce inequality. McCall describes the methodological challenge as the complexity of analysing multiple, intersecting and mutually constitutive social relations. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall subsequently argued that intersectionality should be understood as a field of inquiry concerned with the dynamics and relations that constitute subjects rather than as a fixed taxonomy of identities.³⁶

³Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 139–167.

⁴Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1245–1265.

⁵Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771–1800, <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>.

This paper develops that proposition for equality research. Its central question is not simply who experiences the greatest disadvantage. It is how inequalities compound, through which institutions, and with what consequences for measurement and policy. The objective is to preserve the explanatory power of categories without treating categories as fixed essences; to recognise individual agency without confusing observed outcomes with unconstrained choice; and to identify mechanisms that can be changed by institutions.

2. Scope and Method

The study is an interdisciplinary conceptual and empirical review. It draws on legal scholarship, sociology, political science, economics, public health, migration research and international equality reporting. The theoretical core includes Crenshaw, McCall, Hancock, Collins and Bilge, Acker, Bauer and Bowleg. The empirical evidence is drawn principally from the World Health Organization, OECD and European Commission, International Organization for Migration, UN Women and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Three methodological principles guide the analysis. First, intersectionality is treated as a theory of relationships and mechanisms, not as a requirement to include every conceivable identity category. Hancock cautions against reducing intersectionality to the rapid addition of variables; the research paradigm instead requires attention to the interaction and mutual constitution of categories. Second, observed subgroup disparities are treated as evidence requiring explanation rather than proof of a specific causal mechanism. Third, the analysis distinguishes social identity, social position, institutional treatment and material circumstance. They frequently overlap, but they are not interchangeable.⁷

This distinction is particularly important for quantitative research. Bauer notes that intersectionality concerns intersecting identities, social positions, processes of oppression or privilege and institutional practices, and that these levels should not be collapsed into a single statistical interaction term. An interaction in a regression model can be useful evidence, but the presence or absence of statistical interaction does not by itself establish whether an inequality is structurally intersectional.⁸

The analysis is comparative rather than jurisdiction-specific. Categories such as race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and social class are defined and measured differently across countries. This limits direct comparison and is itself part of the

⁶Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs* 38, no. 4 (2013): 785–810, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>.

⁷Ange-Marie Hancock, "When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm," *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 1 (2007): 63–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592707070065>.

⁸Greta R. Bauer, "Incorporating Intersectionality Theory into Population Health Research Methodology: Challenges and the Potential to Advance Health Equity," *Social Science & Medicine* 110 (2014): 10–17, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.03.022>.

substantive problem: people may be socially classified in ways that administrative data do not record, while some dimensions of disadvantage are legally protected and others are not.

3. What Intersectionality Adds

3.1 From categories to relationships

Conventional inequality analysis often begins with categories. Researchers compare women with men, migrants with the native-born, disabled with non-disabled people, or income quintiles with one another. These comparisons reveal important disparities. Their limitation arises when the effect of a category depends on another category or on the institutional setting in which it is activated.

Intersectionality changes the unit of analysis. Instead of asking only whether women earn less than men, it asks whether gendered labour-market processes differ by race, migration status, disability, class or family position. Instead of asking only whether migrants have lower employment rates, it asks how legal status, reason for migration, gender, education and time since arrival shape access to work and job quality. The analytical move is from categories as independent attributes to social positions embedded in relations of power.

Collins and Bilge describe intersectionality as a way of understanding how relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ability, ethnicity and age are mutually shaping within social contexts. This does not mean that every dimension always matters equally. It means that the relevance of a dimension must be established rather than assumed away.⁹

3.2 Non-additivity

The most important implication is non-additivity. If one disadvantage is associated with an average effect of x and another with an average effect of y , an intersectional outcome need not equal $x + y$. The mechanisms can reinforce one another, offset one another, or generate a qualitatively different pathway.

This is why the language of double or triple disadvantage can be useful descriptively but insufficient analytically. It implies arithmetic accumulation. Intersectionality asks whether the combination changes the process itself. Bowleg uses this problem to criticise formulations such as “women and minorities”, which position groups as mutually exclusive and obscure people who belong to both.¹⁰

Non-additivity also means that privilege and disadvantage can coexist. A highly educated migrant may possess strong educational resources but weak labour-market recognition of foreign qualifications. A wealthy woman may have substantial economic security while remaining exposed to gender-specific violence. A man from a racially marginalised group may experience gender privilege within some settings and racial disadvantage within

⁹Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 1–30.

¹⁰Lisa Bowleg, “The Problem with the Phrase Women and Minorities: Intersectionality—an Important Theoretical Framework for Public Health,” *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 7 (2012): 1267–1273, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.300750>.

others. Intersectional analysis therefore resists ranking people on a single scale of oppression.

3.3 Institutions and power

Intersectionality is ultimately institutional. Social categories matter because institutions attach consequences to them. Acker describes organisations as “inequality regimes”: interlocking practices and processes through which gender, class and racial inequalities are produced and reproduced at work. Recruitment criteria, job design, promotion norms, working-time expectations, informal networks and pay systems can each appear neutral while interacting to advantage some social positions over others.¹¹

The same logic applies outside employment. Housing markets link wealth, geography and discrimination. Education systems connect parental resources, neighbourhoods, disability support, language and institutional expectations. Health systems connect income, disability, race, gender, age and access. Immigration systems can define eligibility for work, family reunification or public services in ways that alter the meaning of gender and class resources.

Table 1. Distinguishing related approaches

Approach	Primary question	Strength	Main limitation
Single-axis comparison	Does outcome Y differ by category X?	Clarity; comparability; simple monitoring	Can conceal heterogeneity within categories.
Multiple disadvantage	How many disadvantages are present?	Identifies accumulation across dimensions	Often assumes additive effects.
Subgroup disaggregation	What is the outcome for a more specific subgroup?	Reveals hidden averages	May describe intersections without explaining mechanisms.
Intersectional analysis	How do social positions and institutions interact to produce outcomes?	Explains non-additive and context-specific processes	Data-intensive; conceptually and statistically demanding.

4. A Mechanism-Based Account of Compounding Inequality

For equality research, intersectionality becomes most useful when translated from a general sensitivity to complexity into a set of observable mechanisms. This paper proposes six: social position, differential exposure, resource distribution, institutional gateways, capability conversion and outcomes. Time, place and power condition every stage.

4.1 Position

Position refers to the social and legal locations from which individuals encounter institutions. These can include class background, gender, racial or ethnic classification, disability, age, migration or citizenship status, family role, religion and geography. Position should not be understood as a fixed identity. Some positions change over time; some are externally assigned; some are legally constructed; some are context-dependent.

The point is analytical: institutions do not meet abstract individuals. They meet people who arrive with different resources, obligations, legal statuses, histories and social classifications. Those differences influence the exposures and options that follow.

¹¹Joan Acker, “Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations,” *Gender & Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 441–464, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243206289499>.

4.2 Exposure

Different groups can be exposed to different risks before any decision or institutional assessment occurs. Occupational segregation affects exposure to unsafe or precarious work. Residential segregation affects schools, pollution and transport. Gendered care responsibilities affect exposure to time constraints. Migration routes can affect exposure to exploitation, detention or irregular status. Disability can increase exposure to inaccessible environments.

Exposure is therefore prior to individual coping capacity. Equality policy that focuses only on whether people respond successfully to risk can miss the processes that distribute risk unequally in the first place.

4.3 Resources

Resources include income and wealth, education, health, time, information, social networks, legal status and institutional support. Kabeer's formulation of resources, agency and achievements is useful here because resources include not only material assets but also human and social resources that shape the ability to exercise meaningful choice.¹²

Intersectional inequality often emerges because resource distributions are correlated. Low wealth can constrain housing options; neighbourhood affects school access; education influences employment; insecure work reduces the ability to absorb health shocks. The correlation need not arise from a single discriminatory act. It can be the cumulative product of several institutions.

4.4 Gateways

Gateways are decision points at which institutions translate social position and resources into access. Admissions, hiring, credit decisions, medical referrals, disability assessments, housing allocation, immigration procedures, policing and promotion are all gateways. They can be governed by explicit rules, discretionary judgement or informal norms.

Gateways matter because equality before a rule does not guarantee equality in reaching the rule, satisfying its assumptions or being interpreted through it. A language requirement can be job-relevant in one context and an unnecessary barrier in another. A full-time availability norm can appear formally gender-neutral while interacting with unequal care responsibilities. A digital application process can create different barriers by age, income, disability or language.

4.5 Capabilities

The capability approach adds a further distinction: equal resources do not necessarily create equal substantive freedom. People differ in their ability to convert resources into valued activities because of health, disability, care responsibilities, social norms, geography and institutional design. Intersectional analysis therefore asks not only who receives a resource but who can use it, under what conditions, and at what cost.¹³

¹²Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment," *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435–464, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>.

¹³Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 39–55.

The same nominal wage, for example, can produce different effective opportunities where one worker faces inaccessible transport, another carries substantial unpaid care, and another lacks secure residence status. Resource equality without attention to conversion factors can reproduce unequal capability.

4.6 Outcomes and feedback

Outcomes include income, wealth, health, employment, education, housing, security, representation and participation. They are the visible end of an inequality process, but they also feed back into the next period. Employment affects income; income affects housing; housing affects education and health; accumulated wealth affects the next generation.

Intersectional inequality is therefore dynamic. Small disadvantages at several stages can compound even where no single stage appears extreme. Conversely, an effective intervention at one gateway can interrupt several downstream inequalities at once.

Table 2. The Compounding Inequality Model

Stage	Core question	Illustrative mechanisms	Typical evidence
Position	From what social/legal position does the person encounter institutions?	Class, gender, race/ethnicity, disability, migration status, age, family role	Population and administrative characteristics; qualitative accounts
Exposure	Which risks and constraints are encountered?	Segregation, unsafe work, care burden, inaccessible environments, legal precarity	Exposure rates; time use; neighbourhood and occupational data
Resources	Which assets can be mobilised?	Income, wealth, education, health, time, networks, information, legal status	Distributional and household data
Gateways	How are opportunities allocated?	Hiring, admissions, credit, policing, benefit eligibility, health referral	Audit studies; administrative decisions; complaints; process data
Capabilities	Can resources be converted into real options?	Accessibility, transport, care, language, safety, social norms	Participation and unmet-need measures; qualitative evidence
Outcomes	What distributions result, and what feeds forward?	Earnings, health, housing, attainment, security, representation	Outcome gaps; mobility; longitudinal data

5. Social Class, Income and Wealth as Cross-Cutting Axes

Social class occupies a distinctive position in intersectional analysis because economic resources influence the practical consequences of many other social positions. Wealth can purchase safer housing, private care, legal advice, mobility and time. It can reduce dependence on a particular employer or institution. Conversely, poverty can magnify the consequences of disability, care, migration status or discrimination.

This does not mean that class subsumes other inequalities. Economic resources cannot purchase immunity from every form of status inequality or discrimination. But they often alter exposure, resilience and the ability to seek alternatives. The same discriminatory event may have very different consequences for a person with savings and professional networks than for someone whose residence, healthcare or household income depends on a single employer.

Class should therefore be analysed both as an independent distribution and as a modifier of other inequalities. The relationship also runs in the opposite direction: gendered labour-market structures, racial discrimination, disability exclusion and migration restrictions can themselves shape income and wealth. Economic inequality is both cause and consequence within an intersectional system.

6. Gender and Race: The Foundational Intersection

The interaction between gender and race remains the foundational case because it demonstrates why a universal category can be internally heterogeneous. Crenshaw's original legal argument showed that Black women could be excluded from both race and sex discrimination frameworks when each framework took another subgroup as its implicit reference point.¹⁴

Contemporary evidence continues to show heterogeneous patterns. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights surveyed nearly 6,800 people of sub-Saharan African descent in 13 EU countries. It found that 45 per cent experienced racial discrimination in the preceding five years and that young people, people with disabilities, those wearing traditional or religious clothing and people identifying with another minority group reported higher exposure to racism. Young women were more likely to experience racist harassment, while young men were more exposed to police stops and racist violence.¹⁵¹⁶

These differences illustrate why neither “Black” nor “women” is an internally uniform analytical category. The interaction changes by institutional domain. Gender can modify exposure to policing, care work, harassment or occupational sorting; race can modify the opportunities and stereotypes attached to gender. An intersectional approach therefore avoids searching for a single race-by-gender penalty applicable everywhere.

7. Disability and the Conversion of Resources

Disability provides a particularly clear example of why equal resources do not necessarily create equal outcomes. The World Health Organization estimates that around 1.3 billion people, approximately 16 per cent of the global population, experience significant disability. Its global health equity report documents poorer health outcomes among persons with disabilities and emphasises that many of these inequalities are produced by unfair conditions within and beyond health systems rather than by impairment alone.¹⁷¹⁸

¹⁴Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 149–167.

¹⁵European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Being Black in the EU: Questions & Answers*, 5–7.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 5–6.

¹⁷World Health Organization, *Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities: Executive Summary* (Geneva: WHO, 2022), 1–2.

¹⁸World Health Organization, *Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities* (Geneva: WHO, 2022).

Intersectionality matters because disability is distributed across age, gender, income, occupation and geography, and because its consequences depend on those positions. A physically accessible clinic may remain inaccessible to a low-income person who cannot afford transport. A workplace adjustment may be formally available but difficult to request for a migrant worker with insecure employment. A woman with a disability may face distinct risks of violence or dependence that cannot be inferred from average disability or gender indicators alone.

The UN Women intersectionality resource guide explicitly warns against an “add and stir” approach in which disability, gender and other categories are simply appended to an existing programme. The appropriate question is how systems interact: which barriers arise from the environment, which from institutional rules, which from social treatment and which from the distribution of resources.¹⁹

8. Migration Status, Gender and Legal Position

Migration demonstrates the importance of legal status as an axis of inequality. Migrants differ by reason for migration, residence status, country of origin, education, gender, family composition and duration of stay. Treating migrant status as a single binary variable can therefore obscure more than it reveals.

The OECD and European Commission report that women constitute around 51 per cent of immigrants in OECD and EU countries, while integration outcomes vary significantly with reason for migration, duration of stay and gender. Across many indicators immigrants and their children lag native-born populations, yet patterns differ considerably by education, origin, age and time in the host country. The same report notes that perceived discrimination has increased in several destination countries and particularly among women.²⁰

The International Organization for Migration similarly emphasises that gender structures migration opportunities and risks throughout the migration cycle, including pre-departure, entry, labour-market participation, family migration, displacement and return. Legal status can therefore operate as a gateway that changes the effective value of education, work experience, family resources and social networks.²¹

This is a useful example of why intersectional policy cannot be organised entirely around identity. Some of the relevant mechanisms are legal and institutional rather than identity-based: work authorisation, recognition of qualifications, access to public services, sponsorship rules and the portability of rights.

¹⁹UN Women, Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit (New York: UN Women, 2021).

²⁰OECD and European Commission, Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023, 52.

²¹Ibid., executive summary and chap. 5.

²²International Organization for Migration, World Migration Report 2024 (Geneva: IOM, 2024), chap. 6, “Gender and Migration: Trends, Gaps and Urgent Action.”

9. Age, Life Course and Cumulative Inequality

Age differs from many other axes because every person moves through it, yet the consequences of ageing depend heavily on earlier inequality. Education, occupational exposure, care histories, employment interruptions, health and wealth accumulate over the life course. By later life, apparently age-specific inequalities may reflect decades of prior processes.

This cumulative perspective is essential to intersectional equality. Gender differences in pensions, for example, can reflect earlier differences in pay, working time, care and labour-force continuity. Disability prevalence rises with age, but its economic consequences depend on employment history, household wealth and public provision. Older migrants may face a distinctive combination of language barriers, lower pension entitlements, weaker family support or restricted portability of benefits.

Intersectionality is therefore temporal as well as categorical. The same social position can have different significance at different stages of life, and disadvantages can accumulate even where annual gaps appear modest.

10. Geography and Place

Place is frequently omitted from identity-centred accounts, yet it is one of the main mechanisms through which inequality becomes concrete. Housing markets allocate households across neighbourhoods; neighbourhoods structure schools, transport, employment access, pollution, safety and social networks. Rurality can magnify disability or health barriers where services are distant. Border location can alter migration exposure. Regional labour markets affect the return to education.

Geography also interacts with discrimination. FRA data show large differences between European countries in reported racial discrimination, while OECD integration data reveal substantial cross-country variation in migrant outcomes. These differences caution against treating group effects as universal properties of groups. Institutional context matters.²³

An intersectional model should therefore include place not merely as a control variable but as a potential causal environment. Equality can vary between neighbourhoods within the same legal regime because exposure, resources and gateways differ locally.

11. Evidence of Compounding Inequality

Direct evidence of intersectionality is empirically demanding because datasets must contain sufficient observations across several dimensions while also measuring relevant mechanisms. Nevertheless, existing evidence demonstrates why disaggregation matters.

Table 3. Selected evidence relevant to intersectional equality

Domain	Evidence	Intersectional implication	Source
Racial discrimination in the EU	People of African descent who are young, disabled, visibly religious or identify	Racialised experience varies systematically with age, disability, religion,	FRA 2023

²³European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Being Black in the EU: Questions & Answers, 4–7; OECD and European Commission, Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023, chaps. 1 and 5.

Domain	Evidence	Intersectional implication	Source
	with another minority report higher racism; young women face more racist harassment.	sexuality and gender.	
Migration and integration	Outcomes differ by gender, education, reason for migration, origin and duration of stay; child poverty is substantially higher in many immigrant households.	“Migrant” is too broad to function as a homogeneous explanatory category.	OECD/EC 2023
Disability and health	About 16% of the global population experiences significant disability; health inequities reflect barriers across health systems and wider living conditions.	Disability interacts with income, age, gender and environment through resource-conversion barriers.	WHO 2022
Gender and development	Gender gaps persist across poverty, care, work, representation and access to resources, with large variation by region and social position.	Aggregate gender indicators can conceal differences within the category “women”.	UN Women 2024
Gender and migration	Gender shapes risks and opportunities throughout migration pathways, including labour migration, family migration and displacement.	Legal status and migration pathway change the operation of gendered inequalities.	IOM 2024

The table should not be read as a ranking of groups. Its purpose is methodological. Each example shows that the effect associated with one dimension changes when another dimension or institutional context is introduced. The challenge is to distinguish genuine interaction from simple compositional differences. A younger population, for example, may have different employment outcomes for reasons unrelated to discrimination. Intersectional research therefore requires careful attention to mechanism and counterfactual comparison.

12. Measurement: Why Disaggregation Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

12.1 The problem of averages

Aggregate indicators are indispensable for monitoring but can conceal internal distribution. An average female employment rate can rise while employment falls for disabled women or recent migrant women. Average migrant income can improve because the composition of migration changes even if a particular subgroup remains excluded. Average disability outcomes can conceal large gender or regional differences.

Disaggregation is therefore a minimum requirement. But it is not yet intersectional analysis. It tells us that subgroups differ; it does not tell us why. The analytical task is to connect subgroup outcomes to exposures, resources, gateways and capability conversion.

12.2 Categories are measurement choices

Categories are not neutral containers waiting to be observed. Researchers and public institutions define them. Race may be self-identified in one country and unavailable in administrative data in another. Disability can be measured by diagnosis, legal status or

functional limitation. Social class can be defined through income, wealth, education or occupation. Migration can mean foreign birth, citizenship, parental origin or legal status.

McCall distinguishes anticategorical, intracategorical and intercategorical approaches to intersectionality, reflecting different ways of handling the tension between categories and complexity. The lesson for applied equality research is pragmatic: categories may be necessary for measurement, but researchers should remain explicit about what they capture and what they omit.²⁴

12.3 Quantitative interaction and causal process

Statistical interaction can test whether an association differs across groups, but its interpretation depends on model specification and scale. Bauer warns against importing the language of interaction from intersectionality theory directly into regression without distinguishing social processes from statistical interaction terms.²⁵

A useful quantitative design therefore begins with a causal hypothesis. If disability modifies the employment effect of migration status, what mechanism is proposed - inaccessible workplaces, credential recognition, health, discrimination, benefit rules, or a combination? Statistical analysis can then be used to test implications of that mechanism rather than substituting for it.

12.4 Small groups, privacy and missing data

Greater disaggregation creates a practical trade-off. As the number of dimensions increases, subgroup sample sizes fall. Estimates become unstable, confidentiality risks increase and administrative datasets may suppress cells. Some of the groups most relevant to intersectional research are therefore least visible in conventional statistics.

Qualitative research, linked administrative data, oversampling and participatory research can partly address this problem. The objective is methodological pluralism rather than the assumption that every intersection must be represented by a statistically precise national estimate.

Table 4. A practical measurement strategy

Step	Question	Preferred evidence	Risk to avoid
1. Define mechanism	Why might dimensions interact?	Theory, institutional analysis, qualitative evidence	Starting with every available category.
2. Establish disparity	Do outcomes differ across relevant intersections?	Disaggregated descriptive statistics	Treating disparity as proof of discrimination.
3. Examine process	Where does the divergence arise?	Longitudinal, administrative, audit and process data	Focusing only on final outcomes.
4. Test heterogeneity	Does an association vary by social position or context?	Appropriate interaction or multilevel models	Equating statistical and social interaction.
5. Validate lived mechanism	Do observed processes correspond to experience?	Qualitative and participatory evidence	Assuming model categories fully describe reality.
6. Monitor intervention	Who benefits and who does not?	Repeated subgroup and process indicators	Relying on population averages alone.

²⁴McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” 1772–1785.

²⁵Bauer, “Incorporating Intersectionality Theory,” 10–17.

13. From Intersectional Diagnosis to Policy Design

Intersectionality is sometimes criticised for producing endless complexity without clear policy implications. That risk is real if the framework remains a taxonomy of groups. A mechanism-based approach leads to a more practical conclusion: policy should intervene where inequality is produced, while testing whether effects differ across social positions.

Five principles follow. First, universal systems should remain genuinely universal. Basic rights, education, healthcare, legal protection and social security should not depend on membership of a narrowly defined group. Second, universal design should be tested for unequal usability. A formally universal service can remain inaccessible because of language, disability, geography, digital access, care responsibilities or documentation requirements.

Third, targeted measures should respond to demonstrated mechanisms. Additional language support addresses a language barrier; childcare addresses a time and care constraint; workplace adjustment addresses an accessibility barrier; credential recognition addresses the institutional valuation of foreign human capital. Targeting is most defensible when linked to a causal obstacle rather than a permanent assumption about a group.

Fourth, structural reform may be more effective than multiplying compensatory programmes. If job design rewards constant availability, if housing supply reinforces segregation, or if benefit systems penalise particular household forms, institutional redesign can alter outcomes for several groups simultaneously. Acker’s inequality-regime perspective is useful precisely because it directs attention to routine organisational practices rather than exceptional discriminatory acts.²⁶

Fifth, affected people should participate in design and evaluation. Intersectionality identifies blind spots that arise when a dominant subgroup becomes the implicit model for a broader category. Participation is therefore epistemic as well as democratic: it can reveal mechanisms that aggregate data overlook.

14. The Intersectional Equality Framework

The analysis can now be integrated into a single framework. Intersectional equality is defined here as a condition in which combinations of social position do not systematically expose people to avoidable disadvantage, restrict access to institutional gateways, or reduce their capability to convert rights and resources into participation and valued outcomes.

The framework is intentionally process-based. It does not seek a comprehensive list of identities. Instead it asks six sequential questions: What is the person’s relevant social and legal position? Which exposures follow? Which resources are available? Which institutional gateways allocate opportunity? How effectively can resources be converted into capability? What outcomes result and feed forward?

Figure 1. Intersectional Equality System

POSITION	EXPOSURE	RESOURCES	GATEWAYS	CAPABILITIES	OUTCOMES
Class • gender • race/ethnicity •	Risk • segregation • care • legal	Income • wealth • education •	School • hiring • credit • housing •	Real freedom to learn • work •	Income • health • attainment •

²⁶Acker, “Inequality Regimes,” 441–464.

POSITION	EXPOSURE	RESOURCES	GATEWAYS	CAPABILITIES	OUTCOMES
disability • migration status • age • family role • religion • place	precarity • inaccessible environments	health • time • networks • information • status	healthcare • policing • benefits • promotion	move • care • participate • remain secure	housing • security • voice • representation

Three contexts operate across all six stages. Time captures accumulation and life-course change. Place captures local institutions, neighbourhoods and national regimes. Power captures who defines categories, sets rules, exercises discretion and controls resources. These contexts explain why the same social position can generate different outcomes in different institutions or countries.

Figure 2. The Compounding Inequality Loop

1. Unequal exposure	2. Unequal resources	3. Unequal gateways	4. Unequal conversion	5. Unequal outcomes	6. Feedback
Different risks and constraints are encountered.	Capacity to absorb risk and pursue options differs.	Institutions allocate access under rules and discretion.	The same resource produces different effective capability.	Differences appear in income, health, education, security and participation.	Outcomes become future resources, locations and starting conditions.

15. Equality Without Category Proliferation

A serious equality framework must avoid two opposite errors. The first is single-axis simplification: assuming that one category adequately describes a person's relation to institutions. The second is category proliferation: creating so many intersecting groups that analysis becomes impossible and policy becomes a set of fragmented exceptions.

The solution proposed here is to organise analysis around mechanisms. Categories are relevant when they predict exposure, resources, gateway treatment or capability conversion. If two groups encounter the same mechanism, a common intervention may be appropriate. If a nominally common group encounters different mechanisms, a single intervention may be insufficient.

This approach also protects individual agency. Intersectionality should not imply that people are determined by social categories. Its purpose is to identify patterned constraints and opportunities within which agency operates. Kabeer's distinction between resources, agency and achievements is again useful: structural parameters shape the conditions of choice without eliminating choice itself.²⁷

16. Implications for an Economy of Equality

Intersectional analysis has direct implications for the wider question of an Economy of Equality. If economic institutions are evaluated only through average outcomes, gains can coexist with persistent exclusion at particular intersections. If equality is evaluated only after redistribution, the institutional production of inequality through labour markets, ownership, technology, care and access to capital may remain untouched.

An economy oriented towards equality would therefore require distributional analysis that is simultaneously broad and disaggregated. Broad, because income, wealth, work,

²⁷Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements," 435–464.

health, care, security and participation interact. Disaggregated, because averages can conceal who can actually access and convert opportunities. The objective is not equal outcomes for every intersectional category. It is to reduce the extent to which socially assigned or inherited positions systematically shape exposure, access and capability.

This shifts the policy question from “Which group should receive compensation?” towards “Which institutional mechanism produces an avoidable inequality, for whom, and how can it be redesigned?” That formulation is both more demanding and more generalisable.

17. Directions for Further Research

Three areas deserve particular attention. The first is longitudinal intersectionality: understanding how combinations of social position change in importance across childhood, education, work, family formation, migration, disability and ageing. Cross-sectional group comparisons cannot adequately capture cumulative pathways.

The second is institutional intersectionality. More research is needed on specific gateways - recruitment, algorithmic decision-making, credit, housing allocation, healthcare referral, benefit administration and education - where nominally neutral rules may produce heterogeneous effects.

The third is economic value creation. Existing intersectional research is strongest in discrimination, health, public policy and social experience. A broader equality agenda should examine ownership, access to capital, entrepreneurship, technological systems, data and the distribution of gains from productivity. These mechanisms will be central to understanding whether future economic institutions widen or reduce compounded inequality.

18. Conclusion

Intersectionality adds a necessary proposition to the study of equality: people do not encounter society one category at a time. Social positions overlap, institutions respond to combinations of circumstances, and inequalities can interact in ways that are neither independent nor simply additive.

The concept is most useful when it remains tied to mechanism. Intersectionality is not a claim that every difference is discrimination, that all dimensions matter equally in every context, or that individuals are reducible to identities. It is a framework for asking whether the process producing an outcome changes across social positions and why.

The evidence reviewed here demonstrates the practical importance of that question. Racial discrimination varies by age, disability, religion, gender and other minority status. Migration outcomes differ by gender, education, route of entry and duration of stay. Disability inequalities depend on environmental accessibility and material resources. Gender inequalities interact with care, class, geography and migration. The relevant unit of analysis is therefore often not a category but a pathway through institutions.

The Compounding Inequality Model developed in this study describes that pathway as Position → Exposure → Resources → Gateways → Capabilities → Outcomes, conditioned by Time, Place and Power. It extends the Equality at Large framework by showing how equal rights and nominally universal institutions can produce unequal substantive freedom when disadvantages interact at several stages.

The central implication is methodological and institutional. Equality policy should retain universal rights and common institutions, but evaluate them through heterogeneous effects. Targeted action should be linked to demonstrated mechanisms rather than static labels. Structural reform should focus on gateways and rules that reproduce several inequalities simultaneously. And measurement should move beyond averages without confusing ever-finer disaggregation with explanation.

A society of equals does not require that every combination of human difference produce identical outcomes. It requires institutions in which those differences do not systematically compound into durable hierarchies of opportunity, capability, security and participation.

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