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CHAPTER 7

Intersecting and overlapping inequalities

Intersectionality can be useful in recognising how structures such as race, gender, class and (dis)ability intersect and compound or reinforce inequalities.

There is an increasing recognition that gender intersects with other structures of inequality such as class, disability or race. Mary Evans points out that inequalities can persist while also shifting over time.[101] For example, the gap between women's and men's pay may be decreasing while inequalities between different groups of women are increasing.

An interest in understanding how different factors intersect to shape social and economic opportunity developed as a response to third wave feminism, which is generally understood to have begun in the 1990s. This wave of feminism was dominated by white, middle-class women and tended to assume that all women shared the same experiences. Black women

challenged this assumption and emphasised the importance of recognising that their experience is shaped by other structural oppressions.

Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw[102] coined the term 'intersectionality' to try to capture the multiple dimensions of inequality. While the initial focus was on the intersections of race and gender, intersectionality can be useful in recognising how structures such as race, gender, class and (dis)ability intersect and compound or reinforce inequalities. The concept is much debated — it is useful in moving beyond the binary of women/men, but as Mary Evans points out this does not mean 'that we should wholeheartedly abandon categories … rather that we should enrich and enhance them by the recognition of the diverse and constantly changing circumstances in which we all live.'[103] Below, we highlight some of the intersecting inequalities that different groups of women experience.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The challenges facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are well documented. Indigenous Australians have a greater likelihood of experiencing poverty, poorer health with less access to primary health services, and a shorter life expectancy than non-Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were half as likely to report that their health was 'excellent' or 'very good' in 2012–13,[104] and

are much more likely than other Australians to die from endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases, circulatory system diseases and cancer.[105]

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are far less likely than other Australians to have completed Year 12 or a Certificate III or above. They have lower workforce participation rates overall than non-Indigenous Australians. The ABS estimates that in 2012–13 the unemployment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15–64 years was four times as high as that for non-Indigenous people.[106]

The 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were more than twice as likely as other Australians to be in the bottom income bracket.[107] The BSL and Melbourne Institute's social exclusion monitor shows that almost half of Indigenous Australians (48%) experienced social exclusion in 2011.[108]

Across a range of health and social measures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women fare worse than Indigenous men and non-Indigenous women and men. Indigenous women are more likely to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress than either Indigenous men or non-Indigenous men and women.[109] Like Australian women overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely than men to have *completed* Year 12 or a Certificate III or

above (47% compared to 44%). They are also more likely than men to have completed a bachelor degree (8% to 4%) or an advanced diploma or diploma (8% to 6%), though less likely to have *attained* a Certificate III or IV (20% to 24%).[110]

Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's greater educational attainment, their labour force participation reflects the broader gendered pattern across all Australians, with a lower proportion of women (53%) than men (68%) in the labour force in 2012–13.[111] This may be related (at least in part) to the women's greater responsibility for unpaid care. Like Australian women overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more likely than men to provide unpaid care for their own or other people's children. The care gap is particularly large between younger women and men (aged 15–24), with women in this age group twice as likely as men to be providing unpaid care.[112] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women also have more children on average than non-Indigenous women, and tend to have them earlier.[113]

A 2008 survey found that similar proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men had experienced physical violence.[114] However, women were much more likely to report that the person who perpetrated the violence was someone known to them; and as with Australian women

overall, such perpetrators were most likely to be a current or previous partner or a family member. The survey also found that only two-thirds of women who had experienced violence within the previous 12 months had reported the most recent incident to police; younger Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women were less likely than older women to report such matters. In 2008–10, over 40% of all Indigenous homicide victims (male and female) were killed by their intimate partner, compared with 20% of non-Indigenous victims.[115]

Over the past 40 years, successive governments have sought to address Indigenous disadvantage with (sometimes controversial) policy programs. In 2008, the COAG Reform Council set a series of goals for reducing or closing gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people in relation life expectancy at birth; young child mortality; early childhood education; reading, writing and numeracy; Year 12 attainment; and employment. While progress has been made since then, the Council recently reported that Australia is not on-track to meet many of these goals, including halving the employment gap by 2018 and closing the life expectancy gap by 2031.

ANU researchers Boyd Hunter and Kirrily Jordan criticise the cultural lens that governments have adopted when seeking to address Indigenous

disadvantage. They question the focus on economic participation and wealth creation, which are narrowly defined and overlook 'alternative forms of Indigenous economic activity'.[116]

Hunter and Jordan argue that the standard measures used for poverty in Australia may not be appropriate for Indigenous poverty. They note that Indigenous Australians are more likely to live in rural or remote areas, tend to have larger families with different kinship structures, and have different parenting and childcare arrangements.

For these reasons, they suggest that it 'should not really be surprising that several studies have identified widespread multiple disadvantages among both relatively well off Indigenous people and those conventionally defined as poor'.[117] Janet Hunt also points out that the focus on deficits in areas like employment and education can reinforce negative stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people while making assumptions about what Indigenous people value and aspire to.[118]

Hunter and Jordan argue that strategies like the COAG Reform Council's 'Closing the Gap' approach are not adequate to deal with cultural differences or the aspirations and values of individuals. Consequently, they argue that 'citizen-centred' or 'Indigenous-centred' approaches focusing on Indigenous participation in policy design and imple-

mentation are more likely to achieve meaningful inclusion for Indigenous people. Such approaches may bring a greater focus on issues like land rights, the preservation of social and cultural networks, and the right to self-determination.

Some social programs, like the Aboriginal Girls' Circle, focus specifically on the experiences, needs and desires of Aboriginal women and girls, but for many Indigenous women the task of fighting racism and the challenge of defending their people's right to a good life mean that they focus their efforts on securing rights for Indigenous people overall, rather than highlighting women's issues specifically.

However, other Australian researchers have argued that we need to pay more attention to differences between Indigenous women and Indigenous men, particularly given that Indigenous women around the world are among the most marginalised groups because they face both gender-based and ethnicity-based discrimination. They have been working towards the development of a Gender-Related Index for Indigenous Australians to highlight the intersections of gender, the life course, place and Indigeneity.[119]

Disability

> Rosa, a woman in her 40s, chose not to disclose her disability to their employers because 'they do discriminate, I don't care what people say, once they know you've got an injury … they don't want to know [you]. And as keen as one can be they won't want to take the risk'. As a young woman she had a suffered a workplace injury with lasting consequences. She had been in and out of work since and had decided to take responsibility for her condition and the associated risks. She explained: 'I manage myself now … I know the trigger signs and … I think oh okay, then I start my treatments and fix myself up.' Because she did not disclose her condition, workplace adaptations could not be made; and in the event of further injury the employer could escape liability. – Job Pathways, 2013[120]

Australian women with disability or ill health also face particular challenges. Women are more likely than men to experience long-term health conditions. They are slightly less likely than men to report having a disability, but significantly more likely than men to report a high or very high level of psychological distress (although this has fallen since the early 2000s).[121] Women and girls with disabilities are more likely to experience violence than other women and girls,[122] and they may also face added difficulty in getting help.

More than half of all Australians with a long-term health condition or disability experience social exclusion,[123] and people with disability have a much higher poverty risk than people without disability.[124] By international standards, Australia has very low rates of employment for people with disability.[125] Insufficient employment support, discrimination by employers, and lack of access to equipment and personal assistance have been identified as factors contributing to this low rate.

Women with disability or ill health face particular challenges in gaining paid work. This suggests that gender inequalities that affect Australian women generally compound the inequalities facing people with disability, producing specific types of disadvantage for women with disability. For instance, women with disability are less likely to be in paid work than men with disability. In 2009, 49% of women with disability were in the labour force, which was significantly lower than the proportion of men with disability (59.8%), but was not dissimilar to the participation rate at that time for women overall. Women with disability are less likely than men to use disability services: in 2010–11, 5.5% of women with disability and 8.7% of men used employment support services and 31.2% of women and 37.8% of men used other disability support services.[126]

Some Australians whose disability or illness precludes them from paid work rely on Disability Support Pension. Like Parenting Payment (single), this payment has had tighter eligibility requirements in recent years amid concerns about growing numbers of claimants and public expenditure. The Brotherhood of St Laurence and others have raised concerns about the impacts of these changes in terms of the difficulties that people with disabilities face in gaining employment, and the low rate of Newstart Allowance.

Clearly, many issues continue to confront women with disability despite a relatively long history of legal and policy change. This has included the introduction of the *Disability Services Act 1986*, designed to improve access to employment for people with a disability, and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in a range of areas, including education, employment and access to premises.

More recently, the National Disability Strategy 2010–2020 listed a range of aims to improve participation, opportunities and equality for people with disabilities. However, such policies have been criticised for tending to raise expectations without providing solutions, although there is hope in the disability (and wider) community that the National Disability Insurance Scheme will considerably improve outcomes for people with disabilities when it is fully

implemented. This scheme is designed to change the way people with a disability access services and support, including giving them more access, choice and control over the support they receive. The specific experiences of women with disabilities must remain on the agenda to ensure that inequalities associated with the intersections of gender and disability are also addressed.

Migrant women and girls

> 'Before, I did not think I could start a business here in Australia. It seemed too hard. I could not speak very good English (my husband would always translate for me) and I was too scared to go on public transport without my husband. I did not go anywhere without him. I did not feel comfortable to make phone calls or go to a doctor appointment.' – Nasreen, from Afghanistan, Stepping Stones, 2013[127]

Australia is an increasingly diverse nation; according to the most recent census, around a quarter of people in Australia were born overseas.[128] In 1975, the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* was introduced, prohibiting discrimination against people on the basis of 'race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin' generally, and in specific areas of public life including access to places and facilities and employment. Laws and charters in Australian states and territories have also

been introduced to prohibit discrimination and support multiculturalism. For example, in Victoria, the *Equal Opportunity Act 1995* (and 2010), the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001, Multicultural Victoria Act 2004* (and 2011) and the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* have been introduced.

The commitment to multiculturalism has ebbed and flowed with changing governments at a state and federal level. As Millsom Henry-Waring has pointed out, there is a gap between the reality of Australia as a multicultural nation and the rhetoric of 'multiculturalism'.[129] Negative attitudes persist towards many, including those who are 'visibly different', such as African background women and those who wear a hijab, headscarf or abaya.

> 'I'm proud to be Somali. I'm proud to be Australian and Somali. It is not good to lose your background. Am I going to throw away the abaya? No way! I don't want to forget my mother tongue or my background. But I want to learn Australian ways too.' — Layla, a young woman from Somalia, *Thinking It Through,* 2012[130]

Women and girls from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds who are living in Australia face specific challenges in building good lives for themselves. The Victorian Government notes that most refugees and

asylum seekers 'have experienced traumatic events such as physical and psychological trauma or torture, deprivation and prolonged poverty, periods in immigration detention and poor access to health care prior to arrival'.[131]

In addition, limited English language skills, a lack of education or non-recognition of overseas qualifications, no recent Australian work experience, and limited support networks can combine to exclude women and girls from refugee backgrounds from full participation in Australian society. These factors affect women's ability to find paid work, particularly if they have recently arrived in Australia.

> 'If I have a problem at the bank I cannot correct the situation because first of all I cannot go there, I don't know how to go there and the main issue here is the language. I don't know how to ask or express myself so that's why I find these times very tough for me.' — Leah, *Women on the Move*, 2010[132]

In addition, women from refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds are likely to face added difficulties to participation, including a lack of childcare services, reluctance to leave children in the care of strangers, and religious or cultural norms which dictate particular private and public roles for men and women.

For these reasons it is important to acknowledge and address the particular challenges that face girls

and women from migrant, refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds.

> 'I can focus on doing something now I know my husband is not in my life. No more … We're women — they think we are weak. We can't do anything without his money, my husband. So this is our story. That's why we want to be strong, to do our business.' — Refugee background woman who escaped an abusive relationship, *Being Around Other Women Makes You Brave*, 2014[133]