# MYCo
## Meet Your Colleague

# Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view
## Italy
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# Introduction

Generational diversity describes the interaction and collaboration of multiple age cohorts – Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z – in a workplace, community or social setting. When we bring an **intersectional** perspective, we highlight how generational identity intersects with other social identities, like gender, ethnicity, disability, class, etc., and how these intersections shape experiences of inclusion, discrimination, voice and power.

This chapter explores how intersectional factors influence generational diversity.

We explore how discrimination can be amplified where stereotypes overlap or conflict and what strategies help to promote equity and understanding. The relevance? As workplaces become more diverse in age as well as other dimensions, policies and culture that ignore intersectionality risk reinforcing systemic bias, leaving some people more marginalised even among "diverse" groups.

# Intersectional Discrimination & Power Asymmetries

## Introduction

While generational stereotypes are widely discussed (e.g. "Gen Z are digital natives," "Baby Boomers resist change"), less attention is given to how age combines with other axes of identity to produce unique forms of disadvantage or power imbalance. This topic investigates what amplifies generational discrimination, how relational asymmetries show up in practice and how different generations perceive and are affected by them.

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Generational diversity in the workplace is often framed in terms of stereotypes – such as Baby Boomers valuing stability or Gen Z demanding flexibility – but when viewed through an **intersectional lens**, age is only one axis of identity shaping people's opportunities. Intersectional discrimination occurs when multiple identities interact to produce unique experiences of bias that are not adequately captured by considering each identity in isolation. For example, an employee who is both older and has a disability may face different barriers than a younger colleague with the same disability. Similarly, a young employee from an ethnic minority may experience prejudice differently than their peers. Generational identity,
in combination with other social markers, shapes not only who is targeted by bias but also who has the power to influence organisational decisions and intervene in discriminatory situations. For instance, younger women of colour may experience both age-related stereotypes (e.g., being "inexperienced") and racialised/gendered biases, which together amplify barriers to recognition and advancement. Research on intersectional inequalities confirms that overlapping disadvantages (e.g., age and low income) have cumulative effects on life chances and mental health outcomes.

**Types of Intersectional Factors:**

- **Disability & Mental Illness:** Physical or cognitive impairments, as well as mental health conditions, can compound the effects of age-based stereotypes. Younger employees with disabilities may struggle with accessibility in digital tools or workplace accommodations, while older employees may face assumptions about their capacity to adapt. Mental health concerns intersect with age to influence inclusion, participation and visibility in decision-making processes.
- **Ethnicity / Nationality:** Employees from ethnic minority backgrounds may experience bias that overlaps with generational stereotypes. For instance, a younger ethnic minority employee may be stereotyped as inexperienced and excluded from key projects, while an older colleague from a minority group may face both ageism and racial prejudice, limiting leadership opportunities.
- **Gender:** Gender norms and expectations interact with generational identity in complex ways. Women from younger generations may confront assumptions about ambition or assertiveness.

- **Religion:** Religious identity can amplify or intersect with age-based expectations, shaping perceptions of cultural fit, work ethic or availability for workplace rituals or events. Employees navigating religious practices alongside generational expectations may experience subtle forms of exclusion.
- **Socio-Economic Class:** Socio-economic background intersects with generational identity in areas such as education, access to professional networks and familiarity with digital tools. Younger employees from lower-income backgrounds may be at a disadvantage in workplaces that value costly certifications or digital fluency, while older employees may lack exposure to newer professional networks, compounding the effects of age stereotypes.
- **Appearance / Physical Characteristics:** Societal expectations about appearance – weight, dress, perceived energy or fitness – can intersect with age to influence perceptions of competence, professionalism or adaptability. For example, older employees may be judged as less energetic, while younger employees may be dismissed as appearing less serious or credible.

Power asymmetries often rest on what is considered "normative" or "standard" in an organisation – seniority, traditional career trajectories, styles of communication, etc. Older generations often hold more formal power in terms of roles, seniority, institutional memory, networks; younger generations may hold social or cultural power in terms of new technologies, fresh thought, values (e.g. social justice, inclusion) but less structural power. When combined with other identity markers (gender, ethnicity, disability, caregiving responsibilities), younger or older workers from marginalised groups can face double or triple disadvantage.

For example, intersectional identity work research (in organisational settings) shows how **senior minority ethnic women or men** negotiate power asymmetries by using different facets of identity as resources or cues in interactions – sometimes amplifying privilege (e.g. seniority) or mitigating disadvantage (ethnicity, gender) depending on context.

Different generations perceive and experience intersectional discrimination in distinctive ways, reflecting both their positions within organisational hierarchies and the societal context in which they came of age. Younger employees, such as Gen Z, often report heightened awareness of multiple overlapping factors that can influence inequity. For instance, they may be particularly sensitive to how disability and ethnicity intersect with age to affect inclusion, recognition, and access to opportunities. Their attention to mental health and social inclusion also reflects a generational norm of valuing personal wellbeing and openness in professional contexts.

Millennials, occupying early to mid-career positions, tend to recognise a broad range of factors that may compound disadvantage. Their experiences highlight that even when structural opportunities exist, overlapping social identities – such as disability, mental health, gender, and socio-economic background – can still create subtle barriers to advancement.

Their narratives emphasise the importance of intersectional awareness in performance evaluations, mentorship and workplace support systems.

Generation X employees often serve as mid-level leaders or experienced professionals, navigating complex hierarchies. They may observe or experience bias related to religion or disability, reflecting how power dynamics influence both the manifestation and visibility of discrimination. Gen X insights underscore that intersectional bias is not only about who experiences disadvantage but also about how organisations respond – or fail to respond – through policies and social norms.

Older employees, such as Baby Boomers, report fewer instances of intersectional discrimination, yet certain factors – particularly disability – remain significant barriers to full participation. This suggests that while generational stereotypes may obscure some forms of bias, age combined with other marginalised identities can still limit opportunities and access to resources, making inclusive policy design essential across all cohorts.

Intersectional discrimination also involves relational asymmetries, meaning differences in who is expressing bias, who is targeted and who intervenes. These relational asymmetries shape workplace culture and the effectiveness of inclusion initiatives:

- **Vocalisation:** Generational norms influence how bias is expressed or challenged. Older cohorts may prioritise harmony and avoid openly calling out discrimination, while younger employees may be more outspoken but face risks such as backlash, social isolation, or reputational harm.
- **Targeting:** Certain groups consistently face higher rates of discrimination based on combined identities. For example, employees who are both younger and from an ethnic minority, or older and living with a disability, may experience amplified exclusion, microaggressions or undervaluation.
- **Support and Intervention:** Witnesses play a critical role in mitigating bias, but generational identity often affects whether individuals intervene.
  Middle-management employees may act as allies, while peers or those with less authority may feel constrained. These asymmetries highlight the importance of cultivating an organisational culture where supporting colleagues is normalised and safe.

Younger generations may be more vocal about unfair treatment but lack the authority to enact change. Older generations may hold positional power but adhere to norms that discourage openly challenging bias. These asymmetries affect organisational culture, as unaddressed discrimination can lead to alienation, reduced morale, and talent attrition.

At an individual level, the consequences include emotional strain, diminished sense of belonging and impaired career progression. Organisations experience lower engagement, increased conflict and the risk of losing diverse talent if intersectional dynamics are ignored. Recognising these asymmetries and their consequences is critical for designing interventions that address not just age-based discrimination but the complex ways it intersects with other identities.

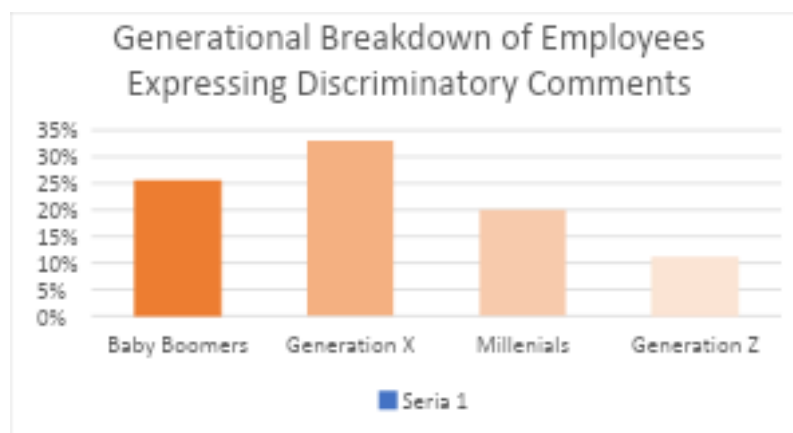# Patterns of Voice, Victimhood and Support

## Introduction

Discrimination in the workplace cannot be understood through age alone. While generational identity shapes who expresses bias, who experiences it and who steps in to provide support, other factors such as gender, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic background intersect to create layered patterns of exclusion. Recognising these intersections is essential to grasp the full complexity of workplace inequalities.
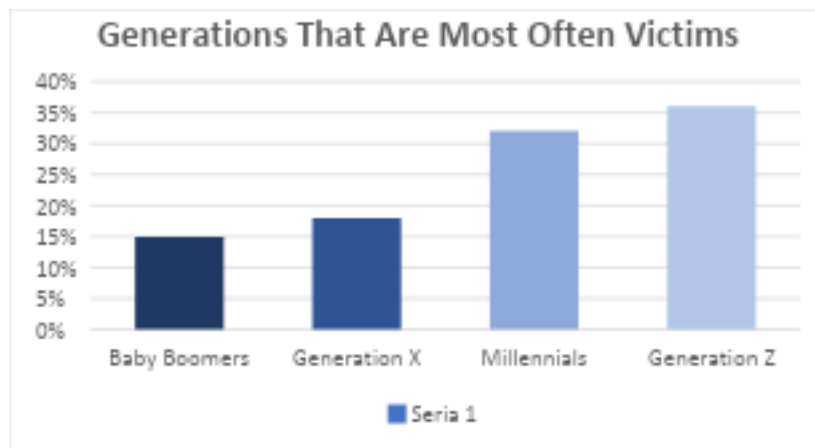
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The expression of discriminatory comments in the workplace is a significant concern. Data from the MYCo survey reveal that older generations, particularly Baby Boomers and Generation X, are more frequently reported to express discriminatory remarks.

This trend may be attributed to fixed cultural norms and a lack of awareness regarding contemporary issues of diversity and inclusion. Conversely, younger generations, such as Millennials and Generation Z, report experiencing these comments more frequently, highlighting a potential generational divide in both the perpetration and victimisation of discriminatory behaviours.



Generational Breakdown of Employees Expressing Discriminatory Comments

https://meetyourcolleague.eu/transnational-report-on-generational-diversity/

The experience of being subjected to discriminatory comments can have profound effects on employees. Younger generations, especially Millennials and Generation Z, report higher instances of victimisation. This increased exposure can lead to feelings of alienation, decreased job satisfaction, and heightened stress levels. The intersectionality of age with other identity factors, such as gender and ethnicity, further exacerbates these effects, leading to compounded disadvantages for certain individuals.
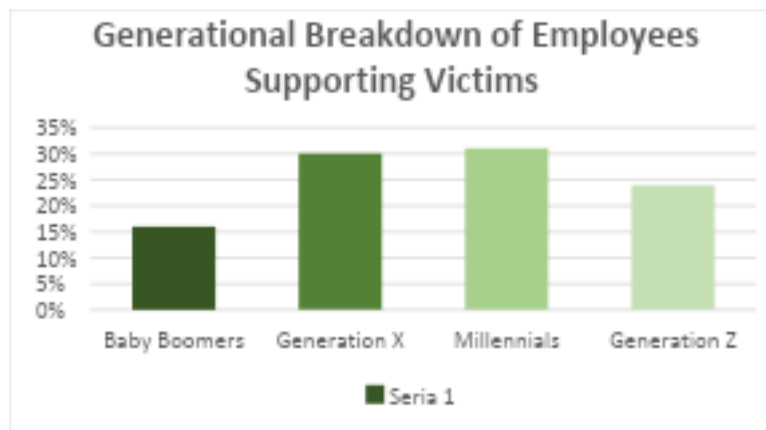
Generations That Are Most Often Victims

Victimisation in the workplace often affects younger employees, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, such as Millennials and Generation Z. This heightened exposure can arise from several interrelated factors. First, hierarchical positioning plays a role: entry- and mid-level employees are frequently more vulnerable to critical or exclusionary remarks from senior colleagues. Second, cultural mismatches between generations – differences in communication styles, expectations, or workplace values – can create friction that sometimes manifests as subtle or overt discriminatory behaviour. Finally, age rarely acts alone; it intersects with other identity factors, including gender, ethnicity, or disability, amplifying the likelihood of marginalisation. For example, a young woman of colour may face compounded challenges tied to both age and gender, layered further with racialised assumptions, making her experience of exclusion particularly acute. These patterns illustrate that workplace victimisation is shaped not just by age, but by the complex interplay of multiple social identities within organisational structures.

Support for colleagues who experience discriminatory comments plays a crucial role in shaping whether workplaces feel inclusive and safe. Younger employees, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, are often at the forefront of such efforts. Their willingness to step in, challenge inappropriate behaviour, and affirm the dignity of others reflects a broader generational shift toward inclusivity and fairness. Yet, while these gestures of solidarity are significant, their impact is not always equal. Employees in junior roles may offer moral support, but their ability to alter outcomes is limited when organisational hierarchies place authority in the hands of older, more senior staff. By contrast, when colleagues with formal power (often from older generations) intervene on behalf of victims, their actions can carry greater weight, changing norms and signalling that discrimination will not be tolerated.

This imbalance reveals an important dynamic: while the will to support may be strongest among younger generations, the ability to effect real change depends heavily on positional authority and organisational structures.

Generational Breakdown of Employees Supporting Victims

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Although age is a highly visible factor in workplace discrimination, it rarely stands alone. Other dimensions – such as gender, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic background – frequently compound the experience of exclusion. Women across generations, for example, often face gendered barriers that intersect with age-related stereotypes, producing additional hurdles to recognition and advancement. Similarly, employees from minority ethnic backgrounds may encounter prejudices that intensify when combined with perceptions tied to youth or seniority. For those with disabilities, expectations around adaptability or productivity can create further disadvantage, especially when layered onto generational assumptions. Even socio-economic status shapes opportunity: access to education, resources and networks often interacts with age to determine who is seen as credible or deserving of advancement.

Taken together, these intersecting factors reveal that discrimination is not the product of a single identity marker but the outcome of multiple, overlapping characteristics that create unique patterns of vulnerability. Younger workers tend to report the highest levels of victimisation, reflecting both their positioning within organisational hierarchies and the way age interacts with other marginalised identities. At the same time, older generations are more often associated with the expression of discriminatory behaviours, a pattern that may be linked to long-established cultural norms and the concentration of authority in senior roles. Support for victims is most frequently demonstrated by younger employees, suggesting a generational shift toward allyship, though their ability to influence outcomes remains constrained by their position in the hierarchy.

These dynamics make clear that age cannot be analysed in isolation. It shapes the likelihood of expressing, experiencing, or challenging discrimination, but it does so in concert with other social factors. Understanding the full picture requires an intersectional perspective – one that recognises how gender, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status interact with generational identity to create complex, multi-layered vulnerabilities in the workplace.

Recognising these patterns is essential for interpreting workplace dynamics accurately.

It emphasises that generational diversity brings not only differences in work styles and values but also complex interactions with social inequalities. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics is crucial for fostering truly inclusive and equitable work environments, ensuring that all employees, regardless of age or other identity factors, are acknowledged, respected and supported.

# Strategies to Avoid and Tackle Intersectional Differences at Work

## Introduction

Workplaces are not only sites of collaboration but also sites where inequalities can become entrenched. When generational diversity intersects with other social categories such as gender, ethnicity, disability or socio-economic status, the risk of discrimination increases. Tackling these dynamics requires more than acknowledging them: it requires deliberate, structured and sustained strategies. A handbook on inclusion must therefore move beyond describing problems to providing tools for action.

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One of the most fundamental strategies for addressing intersectional discrimination is **awareness raising**. Employees often understand the barriers they personally encounter but remain less attentive to the challenges affecting others. This selective perception can unintentionally reinforce silos between generations. For example, younger workers, especially Gen Z, are highly attuned to issues of ethnicity and disability, reflecting their lived realities in increasingly diverse societies. Millennials often bring mental health and stress-related concerns to the forefront, emphasising how workplace culture and workloads intersect with personal wellbeing. Members of Generation X, on the other hand, frequently identify exclusion based on religion and disability, shaped by their own mid-career experiences.

Baby Boomers are generally less likely to perceive broad patterns of intersectional disadvantage, focusing more narrowly on disability. Without structured opportunities for dialogue, each group risks treating its own perspective as universal. Awareness sessions, storytelling initiatives, and cross-generational workshops can help employees develop a shared vocabulary, allowing them to see discrimination as multi-faceted rather than confined to their own lens.

*Case example:* In a cross-generational workshop, a Gen Z employee shares how disability accommodations are central to her daily work experience, while a Gen X colleague highlights the subtle religious biases he has faced. The exchange helps both realise that their challenges, while different, stem from the same broader culture of exclusion.

Awareness, however, is only the starting point. For inclusion to become actionable, employees must feel confident they can raise concerns without facing retaliation, dismissal, or reputational harm. This is where **safe structures** become indispensable. Mechanisms such as confidential reporting lines, dedicated mediators and anonymous digital platforms create channels for speaking up without exposure to risk. Such systems are especially critical for younger employees, who may feel vulnerable within steep hierarchies, and for older

colleagues, who may fear admitting to discrimination could undermine their authority or be read as a sign of weakness. Embedding these safeguards into organisational design signals that accountability is structural rather than optional – a clear message that inclusion is not left to goodwill but backed by enforceable protections.

*Case example:* A Millennial employee, struggling with stress-related discrimination from a manager, feels unable to speak out directly. An anonymous digital reporting platform allows her to raise the issue safely. When leadership responds promptly, it sends a strong signal that her concerns matter and retaliation will not be tolerated.

Another cornerstone of progress lies in **allyship and mentorship across generations**. While generational groups may differ in their perceptions of discrimination, these differences can become complementary strengths when harnessed intentionally. A Millennial manager, for instance, can mentor a Gen Z colleague, guiding them on how to voice concerns while using their own influence to elevate those concerns in leadership forums. Similarly, a Baby Boomer in a senior role can use their positional authority to legitimise discussions of wellbeing, intersectionality and bias, making clear that these are core organisational issues rather than peripheral or "too sensitive." Formal mentorship programs that bring together employees across both generational and identity lines strengthen solidarity and help individuals see beyond their blind spots, fostering bridges where gaps might otherwise persist.

*Case example:* A Baby Boomer director publicly endorses a Gen Z employee's proposal for a mental health initiative, using her authority to push the conversation into the executive agenda. This not only validates the younger employee's concerns but also demonstrates to the wider organisation that mental health is a leadership priority.

Beyond interpersonal support, organisations must recognise that **culture is shaped not only by individuals but also by systems**. Recruitment, promotion and evaluation processes often unintentionally reinforce bias. Awareness of intersectionality challenges these stereotypes by showing that individuals cannot be reduced to generational labels. Embedding anti-bias training in hiring and appraisal practices ensures that diverse candidates are assessed on merit, not filtered through unexamined generational or intersectional expectations.

*Case example:* During a promotion round, a Gen X female employee is initially overlooked because of assumptions that she may not adapt well to new technologies. Anti-bias training helps the panel recognise this stereotype and her strong track record of innovation is ultimately given the weight it deserves.

**Policies** also form an essential backbone for long-term change. Organisations that explicitly name intersectional discrimination signal awareness that disadvantage is rarely one-dimensional. Such policies should highlight how age interacts with gender, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status, offering guidelines for managers to respond appropriately.

But policy alone cannot create transformation. Enforcement is key: without leaders modelling inclusive behaviour and without accountability mechanisms, policies risk remaining symbolic gestures. Leadership must integrate inclusivity into performance indicators, decision-making committees and recognition frameworks so that employees see inclusive behaviour rewarded, not sidelined.

*Case example:* A company introduces a policy against intersectional discrimination but also ties manager bonuses to inclusive team practices. A Baby Boomer leader who actively champions diverse hiring and supports mentoring across generations is publicly recognised, reinforcing that inclusive leadership is integral to organisational success.

Crucially, strategies need to evolve with generational shifts. What resonates with Millennials may not fully address the priorities of Gen Z and what supports Gen X may not speak to Baby Boomers. For example, younger employees may expect flexible mental health policies or recognition of identity-based resource groups, while older employees may value accessible benefits, phased retirement options or recognition of caregiving responsibilities. Organisations that treat inclusion as static risk alienating one group while supporting another. By continuously engaging in dialogue across generations, leaders can adapt strategies to meet changing needs, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" approach.

Finally, culture change requires **visible, sustained commitment**. Symbolic actions – such as celebrating diversity days – may raise awareness but cannot replace long-term investments in inclusive leadership and structural reform. Employees across generations will only believe in change when they see leaders consistently acting on these principles, addressing discriminatory behaviour openly and ensuring that all voices are heard. When awareness, safety, mentorship, policy and culture align, workplaces move closer to dismantling intersectional disadvantages and creating environments where generational diversity becomes a strength rather than a source of division.

# Key takeaways

- **Intersectionality** reminds us that people are never defined by age alone; other identities (gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic background, religion, appearance) overlap with generational identity to shape how they are treated.

- If organisations only look at age differences without considering intersectionality, they risk reinforcing hidden biases and leaving already marginalised groups even more excluded.

- **Intersectional discrimination** happens when age-related biases combine with other forms of prejudice, creating unique disadvantages (e.g., a young woman of colour being labelled both "inexperienced" and "too assertive").

- Power is unevenly distributed: **Older generations** often hold formal organisational power (seniority, decision-making authority, established networks). **Younger generations** may hold cultural or social influence (digital fluency, progressive values, focus on social justice) but lack structural authority.

- Different generations perceive intersectional bias differently: **Gen Z** – especially alert to ethnicity, disability, and mental health issues. **Millennials** – highlight stress, workload and subtle barriers in promotions and evaluations. **Gen X** – recognise religious and disability-based exclusion from a mid-career perspective.
  **Baby Boomers**: report less discrimination overall due to seniority, but disability remains a significant barrier.

- **Disability & Mental Health**: Younger workers may face accessibility issues in digital tools, while older workers may be doubted for adaptability. Mental health challenges intersect with age, affecting visibility and career growth.

- **Ethnicity/Nationality**: Minority employees face compounded bias – a young ethnic minority worker may be excluded as "inexperienced," while an older minority colleague may face both racism and ageism.

- **Gender**: Women often experience layered stereotypes – e.g., younger women seen as too inexperienced or overly ambitious; older women sidelined as "past their peak."

- **Religion**: Religious identity may clash with generational expectations about work ethic, availability, or cultural fit.

- **Socio-economic Class**: Lower-income backgrounds limit access to networks, digital fluency, or costly credentials, compounding generational stereotypes of competence.

- **Appearance/Physical Characteristics**: Older employees may be stereotyped as "less energetic," while younger ones may be dismissed as "not serious enough."

- **Awareness building**: Structured dialogue (workshops, storytelling, cross-generational exchanges) helps employees see beyond their personal lens and recognise discrimination as multi-layered.

- **Safe reporting structures**: Anonymous platforms, mediators, and confidential lines reduce fear of retaliation — crucial for junior staff and older employees worried about reputational harm.

- **Allyship & mentorship**: Intentional cross-generational mentoring (e.g., a Boomer using authority to back a Gen Z initiative, or a Millennial coaching on career navigation) strengthens solidarity and bridges gaps.
- **Bias-aware systems**: Embedding anti-bias training into hiring, promotions and evaluations reduces reliance on stereotypes about age or identity.
- **Policy & accountability**: Policies must explicitly address intersectionality and be enforced through leadership modelling, rewards for inclusive behaviour and performance metrics tied to equity goals.
- Generational diversity becomes a strength only when organisations embed intersectional equity into culture, policies and everyday practices.

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