MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view

Italy

LABC

Intersectional Discrimination & Power Asymmetries

Co-funded by
the European Union

Partners

LABC   E&D Knowledge Consulting   BALLYHOURA DEVELOPMENT CLG   Centrum Wspierania Edukacji i Przedsiębiorczości   diciannove•coop   assist | International HR |

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.

Content

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.

Generational Cards

MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view

Intersectional Discrimination & Power Asymmetries
Generation: **Gen Z**

The Stereotype

"Too sensitive / inexperienced" – Frequently perceived as naïve, overly idealistic or lacking resilience and not seen as having the authority to influence workplace culture. Their viewpoints are often overlooked and their understanding of professional hierarchies may be undervalued. While they are seldom identified as perpetrators, subtle biases can still emerge. They tend to show stronger awareness around issues of ethnicity and disability, reflecting how early exposure fosters their inclusive outlook.

Research Findings

25% identify disability and ethnicity as decisive factors shaping their work experiences. This reflects not fragility, but heightened awareness of how structural inequalities affect them directly or peers around them. Their "sensitivity" can thus be reframed as an advanced intersectional lens. Rarely reported as perpetrators, but subtle bias can surface. Awareness is heightened around ethnicity and disability, showing that early exposure shapes their inclusive mindset.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Don't dismiss Gen Z concerns as immaturity. Engage them in policy, diversity councils and mentoring. Their perspectives flag systemic issues early and strengthen inclusion efforts. Provide bias training from day one, value their insights as assets and create safe spaces for meaningful contributions.

MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view

Intersectional Discrimination & Power Asymmetries
Generation: **Millenials**

The Stereotype

Entitled / always seeking inclusion" – Sometimes framed as demanding or overly focused on fairness. Considered "too politically correct" or hypersensitive, especially around microaggressions and diversity issues. Critics suggest they overemphasise fairness at the expense of pragmatism.

Research Findings

Millennials often identify as many as seven intersecting disadvantages that shape workplace opportunities, with disability and mental health standing out in particular. Their call for inclusion reflects not entitlement, but lived experience of navigating stress, precarious career paths and wellbeing challenges. While rarely engaging in discriminatory behaviour, they remain especially alert to how stress, disability and socio-economic disadvantage influence workplace dynamics.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Establish structured feedback channels (surveys, focus groups) for Millennials to voice concerns safely. Pair this with targeted initiatives on mental health, disability support and flexible work to show their advocacy drives real change. Empower them to lead inclusively, modeling open communication. Acknowledge advocacy and cultural sensitivity as core leadership qualities and embed them into team culture.

MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view

Intersectional Discrimination & Power Asymmetries
Generation: Gen X

The Stereotype

"Overlooked / conservative" – Frequently regarded as the "invisible middle" between outspoken younger employees and authoritative senior leaders. Often seen as pragmatic and cautious, they may be perceived as resistant to change. Many tend to sidestep inclusion debates, favouring established norms and operational efficiency over broader cultural transformation.

Research Findings

Gen X are aware of discrimination around religion and disability, shaped by both managerial roles and personal responsibilities. While sometimes seen as conservative, they can experience subtle exclusion themselves. Their mid-career authority positions them to either challenge or reinforce workplace biases, making their engagement crucial for inclusion efforts.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Amplify Gen X voices in leadership spaces and emphasize their role as bridges between generations. Encourage participation in formal allyship and mentoring programs, positioning their pragmatic, mid-career perspective as a stabilising force in diversity initiatives. Leverage their experience through allyship and respectful dialogue initiatives, providing tools to transform authority into positive influence and foster inclusion and cultural awareness across teams.

Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view
Intersectional Discrimination & Power Asymmetries
Generation: **Babyboomers**

The Stereotype

"Resistant to change" – Often viewed as set in their ways and less receptive to evolving social and workplace norms. They tend to uphold traditional hierarchies and may find it challenging to adapt to shifting cultural expectations around diversity.

Research Findings

While Boomers report fewer instances of discrimination, disability consistently stands out in their experiences. Exclusion is often subtle, including inaccessible technologies, assumptions about digital skills or underestimating their adaptability.
They are most frequently linked to discriminatory remarks, particularly around disability. Age and long tenure can also reinforce traditionalist perspectives on inclusion.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Provide accessible accommodations and inclusive technology to ensure older employees with disabilities are fully integrated into digital workplaces. Leverage their professional experience to shape intergenerational inclusion strategies, reframing them as valuable resources rather than "obstacles to progress." Engage Boomers through cross-generational workshops and storytelling, validating their expertise while updating their understanding of current cultural norms and inclusive practices.

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.

Sources

Crenshaw, K. (1989). *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, Article 8. Retrieved from

https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/

Atewologun, D. (2025, February). *Intersectionality: Theory* [PDF]. Delta Alpha Psi. Retrieved from

https://deltaalphapsi.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Atewologun-Intersectionality-Theory-.pdf

Goldsmiths Research. (n.d.). *Feminism, generation and intersectionality* [PDF]. Retrieved from

https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/32185/4/Feminism_Generation_and_Intersectionality.pdf

Harvard Business School. (n.d.). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Retrieved from

https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=54851

Pinnacle Wellbeing. (n.d.). *Supporting employee well-being across generations: Tailoring strategies for Millennials, Gen Z and Boomers*. Retrieved from

https://pinnaclewellbeing.co.uk/supporting-employee-well-being-across-generations-tailoring-strategies-for-millennials-gen-z-and-boomers/

PMC / NCBI. (n.d.). *Generations and Generational Differences: Debunking Myths in Organizational Science and Practice and Paving New Paths Forward*. *PMC*. Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7471586/

ResearchGate. (n.d.). *Employee well-being and sustainable HR practices: A pathway to long-term organizational success*. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385842449_EMPLOYEE_WELL-BEING_AND_SUSTAINABLE_HR_PRACTICES_A_PATHWAY_TO_LONG-TERM_ORGANIZATIONAL_SUCCESS

ResearchGate. (n.d.). *Intersectionality as a methodological tool in qualitative equality diversity and inclusion research*. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372219053_Intersectionality_as_a_methodological_tool_in_qualitative_equality_diversity_and_inclusion_research

ResearchGate. (n.d.). *Linking contexts, intersectionality and generations: Toward a multidimensional theory of Millennials and social change*. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340981551_Linking_Contexts_Intersectionality_and_Generations_Toward_a_Multidimensional_Theory_of_Millennials_and_Social_Change

UN Women. (2022). *Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit (EN)*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Retrieved from

https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit-en.pdf

Wiley. (n.d.). *Revealing Intersectional Dynamics in Organizations: Introducing 'Intersectional Identity Work*. *Gender, Work & Organization*. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12082