

GUIDING PRINCIPLE 1

AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST APPROACH

An intersectional approach to feminism acknowledges that while women share similar experiences of discrimination, harassment, sexism, inequality and oppression on the basis of their sex and gender, not all women are equally disadvantaged or have equal access to resources, power and privilege. An intersectional approach to feminism requires analysis and action that is not only gendered, but considers how other forms of systemic oppression and discrimination – such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, biphobia or ableism – can intersect with and impact on women’s experiences of gender, inequality, discrimination, harassment, violence or abuse.

In the context of addressing violence against women, an intersectional approach recognises that the way women experience gender and inequality can be different based on a range of other cultural, individual, historical, environmental or structural factors including (but not limited to) race, age, geographic location, sexual orientation, ability or class. This approach also recognises that the drivers, dynamics and impacts of violence women experience can be compounded and magnified by their experience of other forms of oppression and inequality, resulting in some groups of women experiencing higher rates and/or more severe forms of violence, or facing barriers to support and safety that other women do not experience.

DVRCV stands in solidarity with and supports work that addresses other forms of discrimination and oppression. We actively promote and give voice to this work and support those leading it to consider gender in their approach, just as we consider how our work to address violence against women can challenge other forms of oppression that women experience.

FEMINISM

Feminism is a social and political movement – encompassing many different theoretical streams – that works to change structures, practices and systems that oppress, marginalise or discriminate against women. A feminist approach carefully considers the relationship between gender and power when examining how a policy, problem or decision might impact differently on people of different genders, particularly on women of all ages and backgrounds.

Attempts to address violence against women are rooted in feminism, with the women’s movements of the 1960s and 70s both internationally and across Australia drawing attention to domestic and family violence as a public, political problem rather than a private, individual problem that was only experienced by particular groups of women.

A feminist understanding of violence against women recognises that this violence is not an interpersonal issue or an individual problem. Rather, it acknowledges that this is a social issue, driven by systems and structures of power that frequently privilege cisgender men and disadvantage and oppress women and non-binary people. Importantly, a feminist understanding of violence against women also recognises that the relationship between the drivers, dynamics and impacts of violence is more complex than simply cause and effect.

Australian and international evidence identifies four gendered drivers of violence against women:

1. Condoning of violence against women.
2. Men’s control of decision making and limits to women’s independence.
3. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity.
4. Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women.¹

These interconnected expressions of gender inequality interact to create contexts, societies and cultures where violence against women is significantly more likely to occur.

A feminist approach to addressing violence against women recognises this violence as an abuse of power and responds to its gendered dynamics. This means efforts to prevent violence against women must address its gendered drivers, and supports for women who have experienced violence must emphasise their autonomy and choice. A feminist response to violence against women places responsibility on perpetrators who make a choice to use violence; validates, respects and values women’s knowledge and lived experience; and supports women to regain control of decision-making about their lives and their safety.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality offers an important critique of systems and structures of power and how these interact with identity. Intersectionality describes the complex ways that different identities overlap and intersect with structures of power and oppression. What this means is that different kinds of structural inequality – for example, as a result of racism, ageism, colonisation and dispossession, or discrimination against people with disabilities, on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity – are experienced differently when put together.

An intersectional approach to preventing violence against women – which addresses the gendered drivers of this violence – recognises that there is no common experience

of gender, femaleness or femininity. Women's experience of gender cannot be separated from their experience of other aspects of their identity or their access to resources, power and privilege. Women experience their gender as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women, women of colour, older or younger women, women who also have a disability, trans women, migrant or refugee women, women who are queer (and combinations of these experiences). Women also experience their gender as white women, cisgender women or heterosexual women, although the systems and structures of power that centre and privilege whiteness, cisgenderedness and heterosexuality (for example) can simultaneously obscure these identities from view – privilege is often invisible to those who have it.

Intersectionality has roots in Black feminism and activism in the United States, going back many decades. Black feminists challenged the idea that gender was the only, or necessarily the most important, factor that impacted on women's lives and argued that we must 'combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of colour face.'² The term itself was introduced in 1989 by Black feminist, critical race theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who argued that Black women's 'intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism [and] any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.'³

Crenshaw later wrote that her 'focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.'⁴ Thus, we now understand intersectionality to recognise that social systems and structures interact with multiple forms of identity (including but not limited to race and gender) to marginalise and oppress or to privilege.

At DVRCV, being guided by an intersectional feminist approach in our work to address violence against women means:⁵

Ensuring women and children's safety, freedom and equality is at the heart of everything we do. All our work is underpinned by our vision of a world where all women and their children are thriving, respected and free from violence.

Considering the relationships between gender and power in all of our work. We recognise violence against women as a demonstration of patriarchal power that must be addressed through systemic social change. We place the responsibility on perpetrators for their choices to use violence, and on society for creating the systems and social conditions which allow this to happen. We do not hold victim survivors responsible for the violence they experience.

Not relying on explanations or solutions that use single categories to describe people or issues. We acknowledge that the gendered drivers of violence against women are reinforced by multiple, complex factors and that diversity and nuance is necessary in approaches to prevention and response.

Recognising that there is diversity within individuals, communities and identities, as well as between them. We know there is no one common experience of being a woman, nor is there a single common experience of violence, while acknowledging that there are collective threads in our experiences which can be powerful when we join our efforts and broaden our collective understanding.

Centring the experiences, voices and leadership of women from diverse communities and backgrounds wherever possible. We ask women who experience multiple forms of oppression about their experiences and needs; we listen; and we do not make assumptions about experiences that differ from our own. Like many other organisations, we explicitly consider marginalised women's experiences and needs in all of our work and ensure our work does not further marginalise or oppress anyone, including our own workforce. We work collaboratively with others who have dedicated expertise when addressing violence against any specific group of women.

Actively reflecting on and addressing our own relationships to power and privilege, as individuals, leaders, colleagues and as an organisation. We recognise that it is possible to experience privilege and oppression at the same time. We work to identify and challenge our own assumptions and biases and we accept that centring diverse experiences and voices may require us to relinquish our own power and privilege.

Working collaboratively to identify and transform systems of power and privilege that oppress and marginalise. In order to be effective, our work to address violence against women must challenge racism and other discrimination that women experience. Similarly, work that seeks to address other forms of oppression must also challenge sexism and gender inequality. While our work remains focused on preventing and responding to violence experienced by women and their children, we support the work of others whose primary focus is addressing other forms of oppression, and we work collaboratively to address violence against all women.

Embedding inclusivity, diversity and accessibility across all of our work. We consider inclusivity and accessibility for diverse audiences in everything we do, internally and externally. This means ensuring that DVRCV is a safe and inclusive workplace as well as working to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of the training, capability building and resources we provide to others.

Committing to ongoing, continual learning, reflection and development of our approach. We acknowledge that DVRCV has significant work to do around diversity, inclusion and intersectionality, and that this work will be ongoing. We are curious, open and prepared to be challenged, and we recognise that reflecting on our own privilege and power – as individuals and as an organisation – can feel uncomfortable. We take active and deliberate steps to create a safe space for this learning and reflection and we are committed to doing the work. We do not see intersectional feminism as a static state, a status or a destination, rather it is a continual process, an approach, a lens we must apply to everything we do.

NOTES:

1. **Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children** (Our Watch, VicHealth, ANROWS, 2015)
2. **The Combahee River Collective Statement** (Combahee River Collective, 1977)
3. **Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics** (Crenshaw, K., 1989)
4. **Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color** (Crenshaw, K., 1991)
5. A number of these points have been adapted from: **Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women** (Multicultural Centre for Women's Health, 2017)