



AT THE CROSSROAD
OF INEQUALITIES /
DISCRIMINATION

Online training on intersectional discrimination

5. Addressing intersectional discrimination in youth work

The aim of this section is to learn about the importance and ways of addressing intersectionality and intersectional justice in youth work, and to acquire the skills necessary for creating a safe environment for young people. After completing this section, you will:

- understand why it is necessary to address intersectionality in youth work;
- understand the impact of ignoring intersectional discrimination on young people;
- be able to advocate for intersectionality and communicate with policy-makers;
- understand why we need to create safe spaces for young people;
- learn what a safe space means in practice;
- learn how to work with young people who hold discriminatory beliefs;
- test your knowledge on creating safe spaces and addressing intersectionality with practical examples.

5.1 The importance of intersectional justice in youth work

Applying intersectional justice to the planning, implementation and evaluation of youth work is important because it means that youth workers recognise and value the diversity of young people's experiences, backgrounds and identities.

Intersectional justice in youth work means recognising, considering and responding to young people's intersecting identities, such as 'race', gender, sexual orientation, economic status and other social categories. The aim is to ensure equitable access to opportunities, resources and support for all young people, regardless of their specific identities or life experiences. It is a key element, as it allows for a more comprehensive and equitable treatment of young people, as well as for a more just, cohesive, inclusive and understanding society.

Addressing intersectionality:

- helps us to better understand inequalities, by better understanding how different forms of discrimination interact and what impact they have on the individual;
- helps us to design programmes for young people that take into account all the specific needs and experiences of different groups;
- helps us to be more inclusive, as intersectionality recognises that the groups of young people that youth workers work with are not homogeneous, but made up of different individuals;
- helps us to identify and include young people from less privileged groups (e.g. transgender people, people with disabilities, people from more vulnerable economic backgrounds);
- helps us build bridges between different groups and promote solidarity.



A youth organisation that runs a programme focusing on youth employment notes that, despite the success of the programme, LGBTQ+ young people and young people with disabilities generally remain underemployed. A youth worker therefore prepares and holds specific workshops for employers where the focus is on diversity, inclusion and acceptance of interculturality. In addition, the youth organisation sets up a mentoring programme where mentors provide advice to support disadvantaged young people. Both the youth organisation and the youth workers regularly monitor the results and adapt the activities according to needs.



A youth centre in a medium-sized town regularly organises workshops to strengthen young people's digital skills. When the youth centre staff analysed the profiles of workshop participants, they found that they were rarely attended by young people from ethnic minorities or from socially disadvantaged families. Youth workers conducted a survey to find out the reasons why these young people do not attend the workshops. It turned out that some did not have transport back home to the suburbs after the workshops, and many young people did not have their own electronic devices to participate in the workshops. The youth centre arranged free transport and digital device loans for the young people. They contacted the municipality, businesses and other local organisations that could provide electronic devices or funding for underprivileged young people.



5.2 The impact of ignoring intersectional discrimination on young people and communities

Youth workers must never ignore intersectional discrimination, as such behaviour can have serious consequences for individuals and entire communities. Young people are particularly vulnerable.

Young people who experience intersectional discrimination can feel alienated, isolated and invisible in society. The consequences of ignoring intersectional discrimination for young people can be:

- social isolation and marginalisation of young people;
- psychological problems (depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, low self-confidence or self-image);
- lower educational achievements;
- behavioural problems;
- increased levels of stress and negative emotions;
- limited access to employment;
- poorer prospects to improve their economic situation;
- less chance of promotion;
- increasing inequality;
- poorer health and access to healthcare services;
- distrust in social systems.

When some groups become invisible in society, they are less talked about, less written about in the media, less involved in policy-making. Inequalities in society increase.

5.3 Advocating for intersectionality

Advocacy is also an important part of youth work that focuses on intersectional justice. In addition to providing support to young people experiencing intersectional discrimination, it is crucial that youth workers influence broader social change through advocacy activities that also involve the national political level.

In all advocacy processes, young people must not only be involved, but their opinions must also be taken into account. Youth workers focusing on intersectional justice should pay particular attention to the inclusion of young people who have been directly affected. This ensures that the voices of young people who have experienced or are experiencing intersectional discrimination are heard and taken into account in decision-making.

To achieve better effects and ensure broad support for advocacy and change in the fight against intersectional discrimination, it makes sense to work together with others. Find other youth associations, youth centres, organisations working with young people, disability and professional organisations, expatriate associations, diasporas, support groups, etc. and approach decision-makers together.



As a youth worker, how can you inform policy-makers working on youth issues?

- Collect data and evidence on intersectional discrimination faced by young people. Research, surveys, interviews and case studies will strengthen your arguments.
- Prepare or contribute to reports on intersectional discrimination against young people.
- Propose specific policies, policy changes or initiatives to address intersectional justice.
- Attend meetings, conferences and other events where you can talk to policy-makers in person.
- Write, write, write. Letters and emails clearly stating your views, backed up by evidence and focused on solutions.
- Use social networks to raise awareness of intersectional discrimination and find supporters.

5.4 Creating a safe space

Creating spaces where young people can learn, participate and express themselves freely in a safer and more inclusive way is a fundamental task for youth workers.

A safer space is a non-threatening environment that provides support and encourages openness, respect and a willingness to learn from others, and ensures physical and mental safety. It makes everyone feel comfortable and welcome, including staff and volunteers.

Safer spaces allow the voices of those on the margins to be articulated, heard and understood. Particularly young people from marginalised groups will not engage in activities or express themselves freely if they do not feel safe.

It is a space that is critical of the power structures that affect our daily lives. It is where power dynamics are essential, as well as the background from which we come and the effects of our behaviour on others.

Safer space is a concept that requires taking into account the needs of young people, which means building it together with them as a practice where all stakeholders have a say and where a cross-sectional approach is at the forefront.

Our task is not yet complete. It is not enough to create a safer space, it is also necessary to maintain it. Creating a safe space is a process, not a one-time act. We must regularly check whether our space is still safe.

Safe space



I am asked my opinion.



I am listened to.



I am able to provide ideas, suggestions and recommendations.



I participate in decision-making that affects me.



I feel like I belong (am included).

5.5 How to respond to discrimination?

It is important to act quickly and effectively when confronted with insults or discrimination based on young people's identities.

- You can talk to the parties involved in person. Intervention may be necessary. In the most serious cases, disciplinary action may be necessary in accordance with your organisation's rules.
- It is important to support young people who have experienced discrimination and to make sure their voices are heard and taken into account.
- Each situation requires an individual approach. Assess the circumstances and apply the most appropriate strategies for the situation.



Connect the different parts of the steps and strategies that a youth worker can use when confronted with insults or discrimination against young people based on the identity of other young people.

Intervene immediately!	Do not ignore insults or discrimination. Immediate intervention shows that such behaviour is not acceptable, thus contributing to a safe environment.
Express support for the victim.	Show support for the person who has been offended. You can do this by listening to the person, if necessary separately in a safe environment, reassuring them that they are not alone and that you are in control of the situation.
Take the opportunity to teach.	Explain why insults and discrimination are unacceptable, and promote understanding and empathy. It is important to do this in a way that does not stigmatise or punish, but encourages understanding and growth.
Establish programmes and workshops that promote diversity and inclusion.	Focus on educating young people about different aspects of identity, such as sex/gender, sexual orientation, 'race', ethnicity, religion, etc., and the importance of respecting diversity.
Establish (or remind of) a code of conduct.	A code of conduct, which sets out expectations for behaviour and interactions, should also include clear consequences for discriminatory behaviour or insults.
Lead by example.	A youth worker must always show respect and be an example of inclusive behaviour.

5.6 How to work with young people who hold discriminatory beliefs?

Working with young people who hold discriminatory beliefs can be very challenging. A youth worker needs to be patient, consistent and take the time to address the issues. It is important not to tolerate discriminatory behaviour and to insist on positive changes that will lead to a safer, supportive environment for all young people.

Discriminatory beliefs can be the result of a lack of contact with or understanding of different groups, as well as ignorance. In the process of socialisation, young people also pick up stereotypes and prejudices. Building genuine relationships between different groups leads to better acceptance and understanding of diversity. Educational activities on different cultures, customs, traditions, genders, sexual orientations, religions, ethnic origin, etc. can help reduce prejudice.

You can run workshops or organise discussions where young people can unlearn learned discriminatory patterns and practices, reflect on their beliefs and their impact on others, and look for the roots of their beliefs and unconscious biases. More effective methods include role-playing and group projects involving several different groups.

You can encourage young people to see individuals as unique persons, not as representatives of groups or categories. This can help reduce generalisations.

You must lead by example. Behaviour, ways of communication and reaction when discrimination occurs have a huge impact on them. You need to show clear opposition to discriminatory statements, practices, even jokes.



Think about how you could improve the way the youth worker handles the situation.

EXAMPLE: A youth centre organises workshops on career development. It is aimed at helping young people from ethnic minorities to better integrate into the labour market. Among the participants is Amira, a young woman of African origin. She is a devout Muslim and wears the hijab. Tim, the youth worker leading the workshop, focuses on the general challenges faced by young people from ethnic minorities. He does not talk about the specific challenges experienced by women from ethnic minorities, especially those who wear the hijab. Amira and some of her friends do not feel understood. No one asks them about their experiences or opinions. They do not participate actively in the workshop. Amira is thinking of not participating in such activities in the future.

A BETTER APPROACH: Tim should consider and address the different identities and experiences of Amira and her friends. Amira needs advice from a youth worker on how to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes she faces when looking for employment, especially about wearing the hijab. In the future, the youth centre should address such specific challenges. During the career workshop, Tim could dedicate some time, allowing young people to share their experiences and concerns. Tim himself will also attend training for youth workers on understanding and effectively addressing intersectional discrimination. He will seek advice and experience from other qualified youth workers and organisations. Amira and her friends will have more confidence because they will feel included, understood and valued in their unique characteristics/circumstances.



EXAMPLE: In a youth organisation in the capital, Mojca runs a support group for young LGBTQ+ people. The group brings together young people from different backgrounds. Sale, a young gay man, regularly attends the meetings. He lives in a poor suburb of the capital with his family, who moved from Serbia a few years ago. His income is low. Mojca is a good person, but sometimes Sale feels that he is becoming more and more invisible in the group. He feels that he is becoming even more different in a group of different people, which has started to affect his self-image. He feels that support groups are necessary, but he is torn because he does not feel adequately supported.

A BETTER APPROACH: The youth worker focused primarily on the general challenges of young LGBTQ+ people, such as self-acceptance. While addressing these challenges is important, the experiences that come from the intersectionality of Sale's identities – homosexuality, ethnic origin and difficult economic status – were not addressed. Mojca invited participants to anonymously provide her with challenges faced by support group members, as well as suggestions for how she can improve running the group and on the topics discussed in the meetings. She has attended training for youth workers on understanding and effectively addressing intersectional discrimination. She has sought advice and asked for experience from other qualified youth workers and organisations. In subsequent meetings, she addressed specific issues such as racism within the LGBTQ+ community, economic barriers or stigma within one's own ethnic community. She made sure that Sale was given the appropriate support and tools to address his unique challenges. She put in place mechanisms to identify and address intersectional discrimination in her work. The youth organisation has put in place similar mechanisms to evaluate its programmes. Sale no longer feels invisible. His mental health, self-esteem and general well-being have improved.



EXAMPLE: A cultural youth association organises art workshops. In these workshops, young people learn different artistic techniques. Sara likes to attend the workshops and wants to study at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design. She is very talented and wants to further develop her passion for art. However, parts of the studio where the workshops are held are inaccessible for wheelchair users. This means that Sara cannot get some materials, and also cannot use some techniques. Sometimes other participants help her, but Sara is still restricted in her artistic expression. She feels inferior in the eyes of the group and the association.

A BETTER APPROACH: Peter, who runs the art workshops, did not consider the physical limitations and needs that Sara has due to her disability. When other youth workers alerted him to the situation, he decided to attend training to better understand and consider the specific needs of people with disabilities. He met with the local organisation for people with disabilities and was advised on how the specific needs of people with disabilities affect participation in the activities of the cultural association. When planning the upcoming workshops, he made sure that they were designed and adapted to consider the limitations of people with disabilities. All artistic procedures and materials were adapted so that they could be used by people with disabilities like Sara. The cultural youth association submitted a project to a call for proposals that will make the studio accessible to everyone, including people with physical disabilities. The space will be adapted, with wide ramps and doors, as well as adjustable work desks. Materials will be at a suitable height where they can be reached by those in wheelchairs. Sara continues to pursue her artistic talents.

Emphasis

Youth workers play a key role in building relationships based on acceptance and respect for diversity. Developing non-discriminatory attitudes is a process that takes time, patience and consistency. It is important that you encourage all young people to take an active part in eliminating discriminatory practices.

A youth worker can help develop non-discriminatory attitudes in young people:

- By setting an example of respect and acceptance of diversity. Young people often imitate the behaviour of the adults around them, so it is important that youth workers demonstrate these values on a daily basis.
- By encouraging open and safe discussions and creating a safe space. Create a space where young people feel safe to express their thoughts and feelings about diversity and discrimination. Encourage critical thinking and dialogue to allow young people with different perspectives to talk. Dialogue between young people with different backgrounds helps to reduce prejudice and promote mutual understanding.
- Promoting youth leadership and youth involvement. Empower young people to lead projects and initiatives that promote acceptance and respect for diversity.
- By including materials with different perspectives. Teaching materials representing different cultures, histories and perspectives help young people broaden their understanding of the world and their acceptance of diversity.
- Through organising education on diversity, equity and belonging. Organising workshops and lectures that focus on understanding and accepting different cultures, identities, sexual orientations and life experiences, emphasising the importance of empathy and understanding the perspectives of others.
- By supporting and mentoring young people. Support young people who want to get actively involved in the fight against discrimination. You can help them organise campaigns, initiatives and projects.
- By responding to discrimination immediately, whenever it occurs. Youth workers must not ignore discriminatory comments or behaviour. They should be addressed immediately. You can use such situations as opportunities to learn, discuss and raise awareness about the negative consequences of such actions.
- By networking with other organisations. Working with other local and national organisations working on issues of diversity and discrimination gives youth workers access to additional resources, knowledge and support, as well as the opportunity to share experiences. Joint initiatives and projects combating discrimination can increase their reach and effectiveness.

CHECKLIST FOR YOUTH WORKERS

The following checklist for youth workers who want to ensure that they are adequately prepared and equipped to work with young people affected by intersectional discrimination is by no means definitive, but should serve as a guide for self-evaluation and further training. The list should be regularly reviewed and updated in the light of new experiences, knowledge and needs of young people.

Personal and professional growth	YES	NO
I have self-reflected on my own prejudices and attitudes.		
I regularly attend training, seminars and workshops on diversity, inclusion and fighting discrimination, including education on racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination.		
I have looked at what intersectional discrimination means and how different forms of discrimination intersect and affect individuals.		
I follow literature and research related to youth work and discrimination.		
I actively seek feedback from colleagues and the young people I work with.		

Understanding the local community	YES	NO
I know the demographic make-up of the communities I work with, including ethnic, cultural and religious diversity.		
I have dedicated myself to understanding the specific needs and challenges faced by young people in my community.		

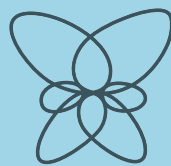
Crisis preparedness	YES	NO
I have prepared a plan to deal with crisis situations that may result from intersectional discrimination.		
I have taken care of the training and materials needed to respond quickly and effectively.		

Communication and interaction	YES	NO
I actively promote inclusive and respectful communication between young people.		
I am developing my empathetic listening skills to better understand young people's experiences and feelings.		
I am trained to intervene in cases of conflict or discriminatory behaviour.		
I provide a safe environment where young people feel heard and respected.		
I regularly promote dialogue and exchange of opinions on diversity and discrimination.		
I am improving my communication skills so that I can speak more effectively with victims of intersectional discrimination and inform others about the issue.		

Inclusion and participation	YES	NO
I enable young people to be actively involved in decision-making processes within the programmes.		
I encourage young people to express their opinions and share their experiences.		
The workshops, projects and events we run are inclusive for all young people, no matter their background.		
I take the needs and wishes of young people into account when planning and implementing activities.		
I ensure accessibility and adaptations for young people with different needs.		
I defend the rights of young people who are victims of intersectional discrimination, and advocate for their protection and support at local and national level.		

Programme evaluation and development	YES	NO
I regularly evaluate the effectiveness of programmes and activities in terms of combating discrimination.		
I involve young people in programme development and evaluation.		
I have a clear strategy to promote inclusion and combat discrimination.		
I adapt my programmes to better reflect the diversity of the groups of young people I work with.		

Cooperation and networking	YES	NO
I work with other organisations working on issues related to discrimination and young people.		
I am part of professional networks of youth workers, where experiences and good practices are shared.		
I organise or attend events that promote intercultural dialogue and understanding.		



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