

Intersectionality 101

NUS Women's Campaign's guide to intersectional activism on campus.

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Foreword

Intersectionality: The theory of how different forms of oppression intersect and impact on people's lives.

At NUS National Women's Campaign, we recognise that when sexism and gender are discussed without also looking at other types of identities and oppressions, the dialogue often revolves around the experiences of the more privileged women in society. This can mean that the issues and experiences of the more socially marginalised women are overshadowed, dismissed or erased. Intersectionality is understanding that one person's oppression will be different to another person's when multiple oppressions are at play. For example, gender and racial oppression will work together to make a Black woman's struggle different to a white woman's.

Intersectionality as a theory is not new, and it does not claim to be an instant solution that will solve everything. However, understanding how it can be used as a tool to explore identity, oppression and liberation can help us activists to develop more diverse and inclusive campaigns. This year, all the NUS liberation campaigns are committed to creating more intersectional campaigns and practices.

With the collective efforts of women students from across the NUS liberation campaigns¹, this guide has been put together to help student activists understand intersectionality and ways in which we can use it to create more accessible spaces and campaigns on campus. It includes examples of how students have successfully used intersectionality to improve both liberation action on campus and representational structures in liberation groups. We hope that this guide helps you to develop better practices and build stronger movements towards the liberation of **all women**.

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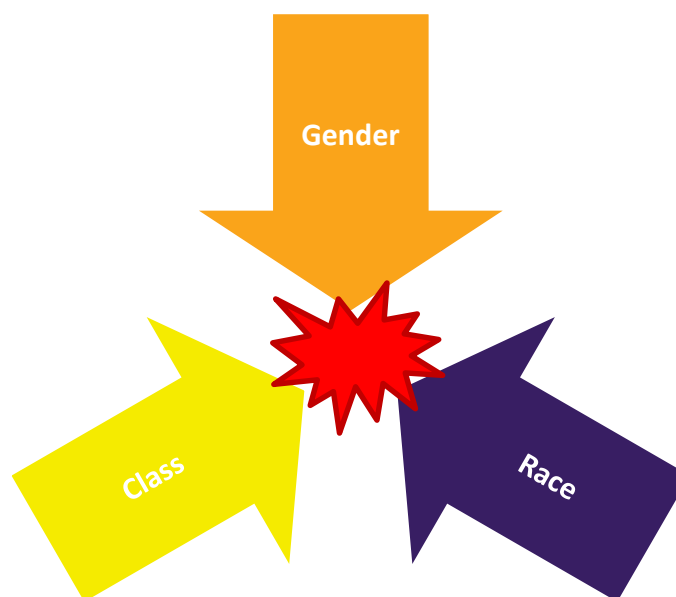
Intersectionality 101

History

The term 'intersectionality', coined by the Black feminist lawyer Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, was created to illustrate the racism and sexism that Black women experience in the workplace in the US. Intersectionality has since become an analytical tool for looking at how different power structures interlink, function and impact on people's experiences in feminism and other liberation movements.

Crenshaw defines intersectionality as the **combination** — as opposed to the addition — of race and gender that creates a specific form of oppression. In the pieces of legislation that she analyses, racism is equated to the experience of Black men and sexism is equated to the experience of white women. It fails to capture and account for the specific experience of discrimination faced by Black women, which is **simultaneously based on race and gender**.

"Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (...) But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm." (Crenshaw 1989: 144)



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Intersectionality is, for Crenshaw, a 'theory from the margins' and a powerful critique of structures of oppression. Feminist theory and practices must start at the fringe, by considering the experience and oppression of the most excluded women, in order to become an inclusive and transformative space for **all women**.

"The goal of this activity [intersectionality] should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalised groups for whom it can be said: 'When they enter, we all enter.'" (Crenshaw 1989: 137)

Professor Patricia Hill Collins (2007) has defined intersectionality as a "matrix of domination", emphasising that it is not only about people's identity but also about **structures of oppression**. This means that race, class and gender are embedded in the institutional structures of society and reproduced in people's everyday life. She argues that this framework of analysis is different from multiculturalism or diversity in the sense that it looks at the **interconnection** and **inter-relationship** between race, class and gender.

"Fundamentally, race, class and gender are intersecting categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life; thus, they simultaneously structure the experiences of all people in this society. At any moment, race, class or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person's life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effects." (Hill Collins 2007: 5-6)

This is important for us to consider as activists, and feminist activists, otherwise we risk reproducing structures of domination within the movement. By ignoring power relationships we contribute to the exclusion of marginalised women and silence their experience in our campaigns. The writer Audre Lorde has called for a more inclusive feminist movement, wherein we avoid reproducing hierarchies between women and value our differences:

"The failure of the academic feminists to recognise difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower." (Lorde 2001: 108)

Patriarchy and beyond

We understand patriarchy as an oppressive system of power that positions men on top of society as the most powerful and capable, leaving women and marginalised genders under-represented and treated as second-class humans. This system impacts on how everyone chooses to live their lives and generates sexism in society. However, women's experiences are not universal or homogenous. Intersectionality can be used to challenge the idea that women experience a 'single-issue' oppression by shedding light on other oppressive structures that uphold patriarchy.

For example, one of the things we talk about when we discuss the impact of patriarchy is the workplace and how women are treated differently in terms of employment.

On average in the UK, when considering both part-time and full-time employment, the **gender pay gap** reaches 20 per cent between men and women with a degree, and 23 per cent for those who do not have a degree.

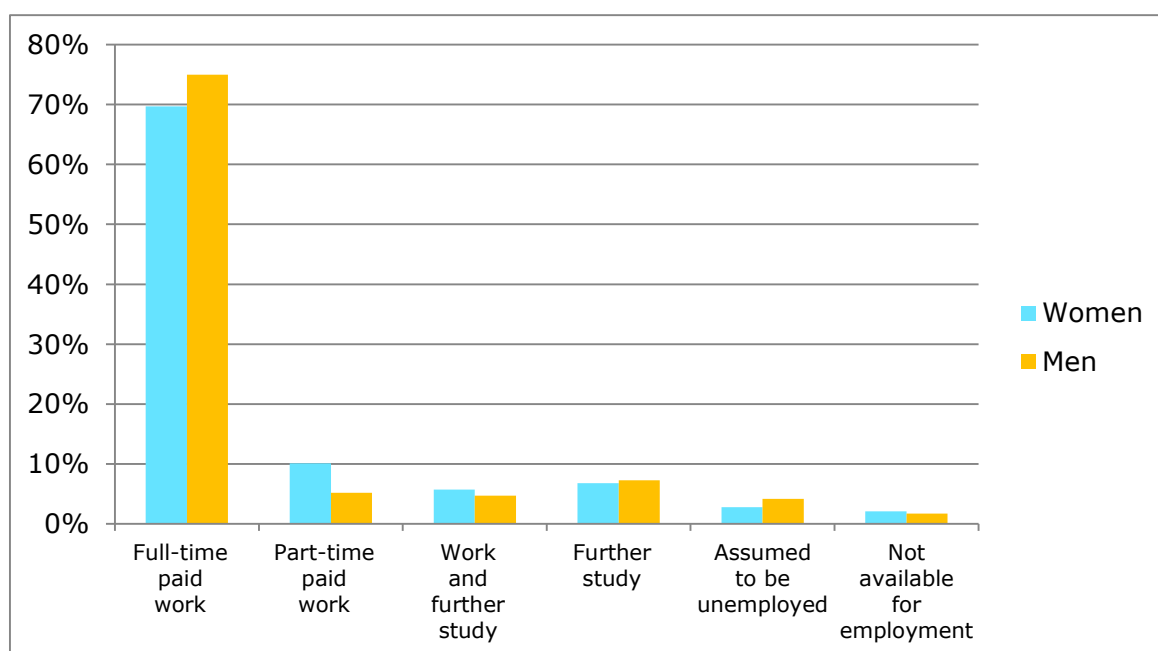
Table 1: Average hourly pay, by gender

	Men	Women
Degree	£19.50	£15.50
No degree	£12.00	£9.20

* Source: Office for National Statistics, 2011

The types of employment that women can access are also qualitatively different compared to men. In the UK, women graduates are twice as likely as men to be in part-time work and much less likely to be employed full-time.

Figure 1: Type of employment by gender



* Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013

On the other hand, we find significant inequalities between white and Black people on the labour market.

Inequalities also persist for young graduates. Black university leavers are three times more likely to be unemployed than white leavers and much less likely to be in a full-time, paid job (Equality Challenge Unit 2012).

Table 2: Destination of university leavers by race

	White	Black	Black and minority ethnic (BME) total
Full-time paid work	53.5%	40.6%	43.3%
Assumed to be unemployed	6.4%	14.8%	13.2%

* Source: Equality Challenge Unit, 2012

Those data indicate both a sexist and a racist discrimination in the labour market. But when considered together, race and gender have a multiplier effect, creating important discriminations against Black women. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Race and Community 2012–2013 report *Ethnic Minority Female Unemployment: Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Heritage Women* shows that:

- Unemployment rates of Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage women have remained consistently higher than those of white women since the early 1980s.
- The overall unemployment rate of ethnic minority women is higher than for ethnic minority men, at 14.3 per cent compared to 13.2 per cent.
- Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are particularly affected, with 20.5 per cent being unemployed compared to 6.8 per cent of white women and 17.7 per cent of Black women.

In a case like this, having a single-issue approach and talking about sexism or racism in the workplace alone will be to the detriment of women on the margins, whose specific oppression will not be addressed. Therefore, the recognition of multiple struggles helps to ensure that more women are included in the overall campaign for women's liberation.

Myth busting

Although intersectionality has grown in popularity in the past few years, it has not been an easy concept for some people to comprehend. Below, we've outlined some common misconceptions about intersectionality.

Myth 1: "Intersectionality is divisive"

Response: Intersectionality addresses the fact that experiences of gender and sexism can vary in relation to other personal characteristics and oppressions. Refusing to acknowledge this creates a single-perspective and exclusive type of feminism. Intersectionality, on the other hand, is based on recognition, inclusion and solidarity.

Myth 2: "Intersectionality derails discussions on gender"

Response: Intersectionality enables more inclusive discussions of gender by considering other factors and oppression, and by helping to create more holistic overviews of issues.

Myth 3: "The concept of intersectionality is too academic"

Response: Like patriarchy, intersectionality is something that many people have experienced and lived before becoming aware of its academic name. The idea that the concept is 'too academic' is ironic, considering that the people who are more likely to face intersectional struggles have traditionally been excluded and under-represented in academia and that the ideas that make up intersectionality have developed from their lived experiences.

Myth 4: "Intersectionality ignores class"

Response: The concept of intersectionality was formed as a result of advocacy for Black women's employment rights and looking at the intersection of race, gender and class. In intersectionality theory, class is fully understood as a matrix of oppression and is accounted for in intersectional approaches.

Myth 5: "Intersectionality aims to 'trip people up'"

Response: Intersectionality challenges the prevailing approach of analysing oppression. Therefore, it may not be the easiest thing for some people to accept and adopt at first, but its aim is not to catch people out. Like most things that encourage people to question current practice, intersectionality creates opportunities for self-reflection, education and the development of more inclusive practices.

Myth 6: "Intersectionality creates an 'oppression Olympics'"

Response: Due the complexity of our identities, it is perfectly plausible and common for people to be privileged in some areas and oppressed in others. For example, a white woman may benefit from white privilege but may experience sexism. Intersectionality is not about competing to be the most oppressed, it is about acknowledging that people experience things differently and avoiding the replication of exclusive and oppressive power structures within liberation movements.

NUS Women's Campaign and intersectionality

At NUS we use the terms 'Liberation groups' and 'marginalised groups' to refer to groups of people who self-identify as people who experience oppression, discrimination and/or exclusion because of their status. This includes, but is not limited to, women, Black and minority ethnic (BME) people, people with a disability, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people. NUS liberation campaigns aim to assist and support one or more of these groups and to overcome the barriers they face as students and in wider society.

To enable more intersectional activity and decision-making for the national Women's Campaign, it is vital for the committee to be as representative of the diversity of women students in the UK. This is one of the reasons why there are reserved places for women who self-define into other liberation groups and sections.

The Women's Campaign has 17 places:

National Women's Officer, National Executive Council rep, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Black Rep, Disabled Rep, Lesbian Rep, Bi-sexual Rep, Trans Rep, Further Education Rep, Carers' Rep and International Students' Rep, and four open places.

We recognise that these are not the only ways that we as women define our identities and that some women define into more than two groups. Therefore, we aim to make sure that we work together to represent these women and also work in partnership with various groups outside the committee, such as faith groups.

NUS liberation committees also have similar structures. The next section of this guide has been developed by women across different liberation committees, who represent or have intersectional identities, to communicate their experiences of multiple forms of discrimination, both on campus and in society. If you want to know about other liberation sections that are not covered by these positions, please see the NUS *Being a Women's Officer Handbook 2014–15*.

Acknowledgements:

Barbara Ntuny (Women's Committee Carers' Rep),
Shaki Obadina (Black Women's Sub Committee)
Respondents: Bahar Mustafa (Women's Committee Disabled Rep),
Aisling Gallagher (Disabled Students' Committee Open Place),
Felicity McKee (Disabled Students' Committee Women's Place)
Anna Lee (Women's Committee Trans Rep),
Reubs Walsh (LGBT Committee Trans Rep)
Respondent: Sammi Whitaker (Women's Committee Lesbian Rep)

Black women

Particular issues for the membership

Black women are still **under-represented in students' unions**, and more specifically in elected sabbatical and leadership positions. Many Black women students feel that unions remain dominated by white cisgender² men and fail to take into account the plurality of our experiences. Debates around women's representation are often centred on white women only and tend to leave out Black women's specific issues or concerns.

In the education sector there is a lack of women in general lecturers or in positions of leadership within institutions — and even more so of Black women. Only a limited number of Black women undertake a PhD, and there is a persistent **racist bias from white tutors** when they mark essays and exams. This systematic exclusion of Black women is often referred to as '**institutional racism**'.

The constant xenophobic policing of international Black students, sometimes resulting in their expulsion from campuses, is also an issue for many Black women students. The welfare provision on campus is usually not tailored to Black women's specific needs, and the intersectional challenges we face are rarely taken into account within students' services.

The media and society in general propagate an ambivalent image of Black women as both **over-sexualised and degraded**. While our bodies are highly objectified, 'pretty' remains associated with light skin colours and 'western' femininity. There is a constant intersection of institutional racism and sexism in the way Black women are represented.

"Black women in the media and society are constantly hyper-sexualised, dehumanised and fetishised. We are treated as less than human and framed into so many tropes which harm us, such as the 'angry Black woman'." (Respondent)

Racism and sexism create specific barriers for Black women in society. We face a higher ethnic pay gap compared to Black men and a higher gender pay gap compared to white women, and we have higher unemployment rates.

Many Black women feel that the mainstream women's movement is still very white-dominated, which results in a lack of understanding of how patriarchy and sexism affect our lives. The issues that are addressed are often white women's issues, while Black women's voices and experiences of problems such as cultural appropriation and 'misogynoir'³ are sidelined or met with hostility.

² If someone is cisgender, they identify as the gender that matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
³ Term coined by the queer Black feminist Moya Bailey used to describe anti-black misogyny.

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Three things that would benefit the membership

- ✓ Reserved places for Black women on committees.
- ✓ More safe spaces for Black women on campus.
- ✓ More campaigns for Black women and led by Black women within students' unions and feminist societies.

How to become better allies to Black women

- Understand how patriarchy and racism intersect in the lives of Black women, and educate yourself on these issues.
- Recognise your white privilege and your position within dominant social structures.
- Listen to the experience of Black women and take us seriously. Do not speak for us!
- Take action — do not just use intersectionality as a buzzword.
- Do not buy into the objectification of Black women's bodies and other stereotypical representations propagated by the media.

Famous Black women

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (writer)

"As an African writer and also as a woman who has spoken for the equality of the sexes, she truly became my hero when she spoke against the Nigerian government criminalising the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans] community in Nigeria."

- Melissa Harris-Perry (writer/television host)

"She is a political commentator, but creates a unique focus on women of colour when it comes to abortion rights, immigration and jobs, and has an all-round intersectional approach."

- Angela Davis (writer)

"She has taught me to never give up on what I believe in. Angela Davis has also inspired me to speak out and never stay silent when there is injustice or when someone is being racist and sexist to me. She has always reminded me there is no hierarchy of oppressions, to never give up and to be outspoken."

Disabled women

Particular issues for the membership

Disabled women are often **invisible within students' unions** and face important barriers in running for elections. Ableism in the women's movement means that many disabled women are unable to fully take part in protests and campaigning due to a lack of accessibility.

This echoes a more general lack of representation in wider society and the media. When we are represented, we are only pictured in a very **sexist and ableist way**, such as the

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stereotypical 'hysterical woman'. There is also a tendency to present disabled people as 'benefits scroungers', which is detrimental to the membership.

Disabled women students feel that there is an absence of discussion about common barriers to accessing higher education.

On campuses, we continue to face multiple challenges such as the lack of accessible venues (in terms of toilets, lifts, etc) or inaccessible teaching methods. Staff and security are often not adequately trained to provide advice and support to disabled women, and the **cuts to counselling services, both on and off campus**, further deteriorates our welfare and well-being. Our members also mentioned the prevalence of '**lad culture**' and exclusionary practices from other fellow students as major barriers to student course completion and success.

Three things that would benefit the membership

- ✓ Tackling 'lad culture' and oppressive behaviour.
- ✓ Making campaigns and elections more accessible to disabled women and increase our representation within the movement.
- ✓ Campaign for better funded counselling and support services on campus.

How to become better allies to disabled women

- Consult with and listen to disabled women.
- Always think about the accessibility of printed documents, meeting venues, etc.
- Do not make assumptions about someone's identity — remember that some disabilities are 'hidden'.

Famous disabled women

- Audre Lorde (writer)

"Her powerful writing and earth-shattering voice always fills me with strength to keep going and keep surviving when I am feeling at my lowest."

- Frida Kahlo (artist)

"Her uncompromising creative energy to depict women's experience has always inspired my own creativity and artwork. She was a survivor, vulnerable, and powerful."

- Ruby Wax (comedian)

"She is loud and outspoken and unafraid to be open about her issues, but can also see the humour in it."

Lesbian women

Particular issues for the membership

The **fear of prejudice** and **experience of actual prejudice** towards openly lesbian students can make them feel excluded and isolated from main student services and activities. It also stops us from running for elections and means that we are continuously under-represented within students' unions. Lesbian women also face sexism in LGBT societies, which are mostly spaces dominated by gay men. On campuses, we feel that staff members are not adequately trained to support us, and believe that there is a lack of information and prevention on lesbian sexual health issues.

In the media and society, lesbians are usually represented as having some traumatic problem or causing traumatic problems, perhaps related to using drugs or being violent and disorderly. **We are hardly ever represented as 'normal'**. There is also a **lack of role models** for us in academia, and an almost total absence of lesbian authors and theorists in the curriculum.

Homophobia from heterosexual women within the movement, as well as verbal and sexual harassment from gay men, are also common issues. There often is a lack of sisterhood and care for each other:

"I term it as 'self-hate'. What I mean is, how some lesbian women are very cruel to other lesbian women depending on whether they are 'femme/butch' because of the way in which society has taught these people to be ashamed of who they are."
(Sammi Whitaker, Lesbian Rep)

Lesbian women further face high **discrimination** in jobs and housing, and experience religious and cultural issues with some societies on campus. Some of us feel conflicted between our religious or spiritual community and our sexual orientation, and cannot be 'out' in both spaces. Finally, our membership reported issues around **domestic violence**, which remains very hard to address for same-sex couples.

Three things that would benefit the membership

- ✓ Specific help and advice for LGBT students, from staff trained on a range of issues such as health, rights and discrimination.
- ✓ Safe spaces for lesbians to discuss lesbian-specific issues and build support networks.
- ✓ Better sexual health services and resources for LGBT women.

How to become better allies to lesbian women

- Take a strong stance against all forms of homophobia when you see it.
- Listen to and support lesbian women, do not question their judgement.
- Do not make, or laugh at, offensive jokes.

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Famous lesbian women

- Ellen Degeneres (comedian)

"A great example of how any lesbian woman can be accepted and loved by millions if people give them that chance. She reminds the world that lesbians are decent human beings (lol) and she's very open (these days) about her sexuality. She's also a great role model for androgynous women."

- Ellen Page (actor)

"Her 'coming out' lately was fantastic, she's becoming a real advocate for lesbians and I only see great things coming from her in the future in regard to lesbian rights."

- Bessie Smith (blues singer)

"Bessie Smith was also known as 'the Empress of the Blues' because she was one of the most famous and influential jazz artists of her time."

Bisexual women

Respondent: Bethan Bishop (Women's Committee Bi Rep)

Particular issues for the membership

Bisexual students are often invisible or ignored by LGBT policies within their students' unions. Just like in the media and society, there are very few openly bi women in students' unions. Bi people are often seen as either straight or gay, or **confused about their sexuality**, and therefore not entirely part of the movement. We are thought to be promiscuous, unable to commit, cheaters, going through a phase, a bit 'wild' or 'crazy'. Bi is also often taken as a synonym for 'polyamorous' (having consensual, non-monogamous relationships).

There is an almost total absence of bi experience and history from the curriculum; **LGBT books are overwhelmingly lesbian- or gay-focused**. On campus there is also a lack of understanding of bi or multi-sexualities, which means that services and welfare provisions are not really adapted to bi women. For instance, dental dams are less often available than condoms. Counselling and mentoring services can also sometimes be **inaccessible or hostile**, even though some bi women would really benefit from this type of support.

We tend to be seen as 'not gay enough' by the LGBT movement, while we experience biphobia and a lack of sisterhood within the feminist movement. Bi women are often seen as untrustworthy or enemies, rather than sisters or allies. There is also a social pressure to be radical and not conform to ideas of marriage or monogamy.

Three things that would benefit the membership

- ✓ Better education about polysexualities, with relevant provisions for sexual health services.
- ✓ Campaigns to combat biphobia, queerphobia, polyphobia and monosexism.

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- ✓ Support networks within and outside the LGBT community for bi single people or those in different forms of relationships.

How to become better allies to Bi-sexual women

- Support women students, no matter what genders they may be attracted to.
- Understand, and help to dispel, myths about bi women.
- Create healthy and safe discussions about multi-gendered sexual relationships.
- Do not engage in hyper-sexualisation of bi women.

Famous Bi women

- Kesha (singer)

"She is a talented musician who has created a music identity and a brand around herself. She is not just a pop star. She is a businesswoman, she is very intelligent and a member of Mensa, and has openly talked about her struggles with substances and eating disorders [...] She openly talks about, and promotes, the idea of being attracted to people — regardless of gender." (Respondent)

- Anna Paquin (actor)

"She is openly bisexual and has worked for LGBT charities and funds to support LGBT women." (Respondent)

- Alice Walker (writer)

"She has written some of the most influential texts on Black women in history, including The Color Purple and In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women." (Respondent)

Trans women

Particular issues for the membership

In the media and society, trans people are often mistaken for drags or cross-dressers, and almost exclusively portrayed as 'freaks', 'fakes', 'predators', 'victims', and 'dehumanised'. Trans people are often also either erased or **pathologised** (treated as medically unwell) within academia and the curriculum.

Trans students are so under-represented in the student movement that we feel there is a need for **more trans liberation officers** and also more trans students elected in other roles. Trans students are often limited or 'delegated' to liberation roles and we would like to see them more included in every level of the leadership. On campuses, there is often a lack of trans-specific provision, **trained staff** and **targeted resources**. Trans students can also feel excluded from **sports activities** and **social spaces** due to gender stereotypical roles and gender binary facilities.

Trans women face exclusive language and practices within the women's movement, and we are not accepted as part of the movement by **trans-exclusionary radical feminists** (TERFs) who deny us our women's identity. We are also often excluded from women-only spaces and do not get elected in women's places.

Three things that would benefit the membership

- ✓ Increase trans-specific representation roles as well as financial support available to part-time officer positions.
- ✓ Provide education and training for officers on trans issues.
- ✓ Organise trans-inclusive sports and activities.

How to become better allies to trans women

- Educate yourself, or find someone who wants to educate people, on trans issues.
- Use people's preferred gender pronouns.
- Use inclusive language and challenge transphobic language and behaviour.

Famous trans women

- Laverne Cox (actor)

"Laverne has so many ways in which society oppresses her. She is the first trans woman to do many things, but she is also one of the first Black women to do many things, let alone a Black trans woman. She has made people actually think and talk about an issue that most try to ignore."

- Janet Mock (writer)

"Janet Mock is an incredible writer and trans rights activist, and creator of the Twitter hashtag #GirlsLikeUs, which aimed to empower trans women."

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Intersectionality in action

Intersectional structures

Building intersectionality into your structures is one way of making sure that the campaigns you run and the spaces you create are more inclusive and diverse. Some women's campaigns have reserved spaces on their committee, and even on their sub-groups, to ensure they reach out to and represent the diversity of women on campus.

Here are some examples of intersectional committee structures:

Cambridge Women's Campaign

- Women's officer
- Four campaigns managers
- BME women's officer
- International women's officer
- Graduate women's officer
- Women's officer
- LGBT+ women's officer
- Outreach and publicity officer

Loughborough Women's Network

- Women's officer
- Vice-chair
- LGBT+ women's officer
- BME women's officer
- Disabilities women's officer
- Campaigns officers x 2
- Media and communications officers x 2
- Collaborations Officer

UCLU Women's Network

- Women's officer
- Disabled Students' Representative
- First Year Representative
- LGBT+ Women's Representative
- Open Portfolio
- Postgraduate Students' Representative
- Publicity Officer
- Secretary
- Social Secretary
- Trans* Representative
- Women with Caring Responsibilities Representative
- Women of Colour Representative

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Inclusive campaigning

Below, we've outlined some things that you should try to incorporate into your events or campaigns to make them more inclusive.

Discussion — Create a space where women from different backgrounds are able to have input on the initial idea.

Involvement — Try to make sure that a diverse range of women is involved in producing of the campaign.

Advertising — It is crucial that your campaign is advertised in a way that encourages all women to feel they can take part.

Evaluation — Talk to various people about how they feel about your events and campaigns and how you can improve things from the perspective of inclusion.

Intersectionality challenge

This group exercise for campaign teams or women's committee members aims to challenge how activists plan campaigns and to help them develop their understanding of intersectionality.

1. Split everyone into small teams and give them paper and pens.
2. Give them a campaign each, for example:
 - body image
 - famous women in history
 - equal pay
3. Give them 15–20 minutes to design an event for their campaign. Encourage them to think about:
 - the aim of the campaign
 - the content of their event
 - accessibility
 - advertising
5. When the time is up, ask each group to present their idea and ask the rest of the room to discuss what they thought of the idea.
6. After everyone has fed back, discuss as a group:
 - How did they feel about the activity?
 - How did the activity differ from the way they have organised events and campaigns in the past?
 - How they feel the activity could change how they organise events and campaigns in the future?

Safer spaces

In women's and feminist spaces, we are usually conscious of sexist situations, but often less aware when other types of oppressive language or attitudes are present. When spaces are made unsafe by oppressive behaviour it can result in marginalised groups feeling like they can no longer be a part of the conversation or group. This is why it is important to have a safer spaces policy on all campaigning spaces, either physical or online.

Sometimes people say or do offensive and discriminatory things, and no space can be called completely safe. However, it is important to prevent these things from happening as much as possible, to act properly when they do happen and to create a space where people feel comfortable confronting discriminatory behaviour and learning from mistakes.

Below, we've outlined key things to include in your safer spaces policy.

Introduction: Not everyone knows what a safer safe policy is, so a brief introduction to explain what safer spaces means to your group would be helpful. For example, "Please note that this group is a safe space in which sensitive issues are sometimes discussed. Please be sensitive and respectful at all times."

Outline your stance against all types of discrimination: Make it clear that as a group, you recognise intersectional oppression as well as sexism and that you are against all types of oppression. Your students' union will probably have a policy around discrimination that you could use if you are having trouble with wording.

Trigger warnings: Ask people to use trigger warnings before saying or writing things that might be emotionally triggering (upsetting or bring back painful experiences). Explain what trigger warnings are and how they are used. For example, "Trigger warnings are used to inform people about potentially upsetting content, such as: racism, sexual violence, self-harm, eating disorders, etc. If something is potentially triggering, you should give a trigger warning before talking about the subject. This will give people who may feel uncomfortable discussing that topic to have a chance of saying so, or to momentarily leave the space."

Warnings: You should explain how people will be warned if they break the safer spaces policy and what will happen if they continue to breach it. For example, "Anyone found in breach of the safer spaces policies will be warned. We have a three-strike policy. Strikes one and two will be accompanied by an official warning from the committee. Strike three will lead to a permanent ban from the group and all of its events."

Contact details: It is important to display the name(s) of who to contact if someone wants to report a breach of your safer spaces policy, raise a problem or requests a trigger warning on a particular topic.

Events and activities

Here are some examples of actual events organised by students' unions:

- **'Ain't I A Woman?'**⁴ **What has race got to do with it** — this was range of events organised by students at SOAS, which looked at how gender and race together discriminate against women. See www.aintiawomancollective.tumblr.com
- **Black Women's Conference** — this Black Women's Forum event addressed issues such as shadeism (discrimination based on skin tone), female genital mutilation (FGM), the politics of respectability and racial micro-aggressions.
- **'Starting the Conversation'** — this campaign at Goldsmiths challenged stigma around mental health by allowing students with mental ill health to express themselves and talk about their experience.
- **'Safe Sex'** — a University of East Anglia campaign that involved a 'Safe Sex Station', where condoms, dental dams and other sexual health aids were given out without discrimination or assumptions.
- **Trans history and activism workshops** — Warwick SU hosted intersectional discussions about trans identities.

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For reference to Sojourner Truth's discourse, which can be found at:
<http://www.ushmm.org/wori/historyculture/sojourner-truth.htm>



Solidarity and allyship

Respecting autonomy

To be autonomous means to be **independent** and **self-governing**. Autonomy is important for liberation groups because, in everyday society, social hierarchies mean that not everyone has the same amount of freedom to speak out.

Autonomous spaces enable people who self-identify within oppressed groups to discuss social and political aspects of their lives together. These spaces can also be used for support, skill sharing, campaigning and more. Autonomous spaces are designed to be spaces where people from marginalised groups are **less likely to have their voices and experiences sidelined** and denounced by those who are more privileged.

Privileged people can silence people in liberation groups in many ways. This can involve using their voice to shut people down, sidelining their concerns, derailing conversations, taking away the rights of liberation groups to self-organise or removing their autonomy in other ways. This even happens within women's groups. For example, a group of Black women students may want to create a sub-committee within the Women's Campaign but face white women's refusal as they assume there is no difference between Black and white women's experiences.

If you aim to be an ally, you need to **recognise when your involvement negatively impacts** on the marginalised group you are trying to interact with and alter your methods to prevent this. There are many ways of supporting a liberation group without being at the centre of attention. The best way of doing this is speaking and listening to those who identify within that group.

10 top tips for allies⁵

- ✓ **Listen!**
- ✓ If you are criticised for oppressive or exclusionary behaviour, **accept accountability** and take responsibility.
- ✓ **Apologise** and learn from your mistakes.
- ✓ **Do not assume** that women's experiences are monolithic.
- ✓ **Do not speak for others without their consent.** Help to provide platforms and spaces to empower and enable marginalised groups to represent their own experiences.
- ✓ **Recognise your privilege** in the world, especially in relation to others.
- ✓ Recognise that **structural oppression** is all-pervasive, even if you strongly believe that you do not perpetuate exclusionary or abusive behaviour.
- ✓ Recognise that violence and abuse does not have to be physical and that socially learned, subtle, embedded **power relations** are always at work.
- ✓ **Question and challenge the prevailing structures** and keep challenging your own perspective.
- ✓ **Ask yourself** whether your politics or campaigns exclude certain groups and how you can make your event more accessible.

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