

How to Turn Words into Action? Status of the Implementation of Intersectionality in Gender Equality Work in German Research Organizations

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Abstract. In May 2022, the team of the Central Gender Equality Officer of the Max Planck Society conducted a survey among German research organizations to determine the state of implementing intersectional approaches in their gender equality strategies. This article gives an overview of the results of the survey to ascertain what is needed to drive the implementation of intersectional gender equality strategies in the German scientific landscape a decisive step forward. The results show that there are single pioneer organizations that provide convincing examples of good practice. Apart from that, the concept hardly seems to be implemented in practice. Above all, it becomes clear that the concept of intersectionality is characterized by mystification, misunderstandings and a mismatch of requirements and resources available to gender equality agents. After contrasting these difficulties with the strategies used in good practice from pioneer organizations, we make suggestions for alternative approaches on how to overcome the concrete challenges observed in the survey. As a conclusion we suggest counteracting the overburdening of gender equality agents by de-mystifying the concept, understanding it as an analytical tool more than a completely new strategy and pursuing a gradual change based on a further professionalization of intersectional gender equality work - and above all by working together to ensure the necessary resources for this professional work.

1 Introduction

"I'm surprised that in the many years that intersectionality has been talked about and researched, so little usable knowledge has been produced that we can use to take action at the base (ID 455⁶⁸)⁶⁹."

⁶⁸ Answers that were originally given in German, have been translated by the authors with the help of DeepL.

⁶⁹ As references for the survey answers we use the automatically generated answer-IDs created by Lime Survey.

“Intersectional” is the current buzzword that signals that a Gender Equality Plan or Concept is state of the art. The idea is to illuminate blind-spots in gender equality strategies, address multiple discrimination and different needs in gender-homogeneous groups and to consider how discrimination mechanisms regarding different diversity categories interact, stabilize and amplify each other. But while the added value of this approach is largely undisputed, many questions still seem to be unanswered or answered in very different ways: What does an intersectional gender equality strategy mean in practice? Which target groups should be considered and on what basis is this decided? Is it necessary to collect data on the prevalence of certain combinations of personal attributes for this purpose, and what if this is not possible? Does data protection make us unable to take action? Does specific group targeting stigmatize more than it helps? And if promoting women did not fit into science's understanding of excellence, how could promoting even more specific, smaller groups? What does a practical and feasible intersectional gender equality measure look like? And what effects do these measures have?

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Question

Based on a survey among gender equality agents, this article explores how far the implementation of an intersectional approach in gender equality work has come in German research organizations. Following the diagnosis of a low level of implementation in most of the organizations, we will try to find answers why that is, what hinders implementation and which steps and strategies could remedy this lack of progress – based on the survey but also on literature and our own experiences as gender equality practitioners.

2.2 Terms

2.2.1 Intersectionality

In this text we follow the definition of Crenshaw (1989): "Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking." Discrimination based on two or more diversity categories at the same time is recognized as a unique experience that cannot be described by the simple addition of two or more forms of discriminations based on only one category.

Furthermore, it is recognized that discriminatory systems, like sexism, racism, ableism and so on, are not separate phenomena, but are fundamentally interwoven, mutually dependent and stabilize each other.

Accordingly, in gender equality work, following EIGE (2023b), we understand intersectionality as an

“Analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other personal characteristics/identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination.”

The terms below have been defined by the authors themselves. We have not found any common terms in use that would have fit our concept of analysis⁷⁰, which is why we created them, specifically for clarity in this article:

2.2.2 Intersectional Gender Equality Work or Measures

Intersectional gender equality work for us is an approach which aims for gender equality by applying an intersectional perspective in all its elements, like gender monitoring/data collection, data analysis, definition of target groups and objectives, as well as measure design and evaluation. Its target group is any person for whom gender is one of the aspects of their discrimination experience. We use the terms “intersectional gender equality measures”, “intersectional gender monitoring” accordingly. These terms are used when we want to point out that an intersectional approach is applied. We want to point out that this term for us is inseparably connected to the definition of intersectionality above, especially in regarding mechanisms of intersectional discrimination as unique and not only as an addition of two or more distinct forms of discrimination and in acknowledging the interwovenness and mutual stabilization and amplification of discriminatory systems. Thus, additive concepts of intersectionality are explicitly not meant here (see Diversity Equality Measures).

We however want to make transparent that there are other authors who argue that concepts of intersectionality with a constant focus on one diversity category, in this case “gender”, are inherently additive. According to Christofferson (2021) this understanding of intersectionality follows a “Diversity within”-concept, which means that “a particular strand remains the focus, and is viewed implicitly or explicitly as more important than others” and as such is inherently additive instead of truly intersectional. In Christoffersen’s description this approach also regards intersectionalities as not always but only relevant in certain cases (Christoffersen 2021, p. 9). We would argue however

⁷⁰ In the publication by the European Commission 2022 for example the term “Gender+ Actions” is used for measures that address mainly but not only the category gender, but it is not distinguished between measures that target the addressed categories as intersectionally interacting or simply as existing side by side – a differentiation we need in this article.

that there is a difference between having one “strand” (Christoffersen 2021) or, as we call it, diversity category as a constant focus and regarding it as generally more important than others. And that a constant focus also does not necessarily mean to have an additive understanding of intersectionality or to believe that intersectionality is only relevant in certain cases. It can instead also mean to have a main focus on situations in which gender is one factor among equally important factors in a unique situation of interacting privileges and discriminations and to be aware of the interwovenness and mutual stabilization of different forms of discrimination. Which makes solidarity and allyship among equality actors with different focuses essential.

This is in order to make clear the concept of intersectionality, which we have in mind in this text. Regarding the measures and strategies reported by the practitioners in our survey, in most cases we cannot determine which underlying concept of intersectionality they exactly base their work on, as long as it addresses or involves target groups discriminated on the basis of more than one diversity category at the same time.

2.2.3 Gender-only Equality Work or Measures

This term is used specifically in contrast to intersectional gender equality measures and means measures that only consider and aim at gender as a diversity category.

2.2.4 Diversity Equality Measures

In this text we use the term “diversity equality measures” in contrast to intersectional measures, to signify measures that aim at two or more diversity categories, but independently, not specifically considering their intersectional interwovenness. This is just a theoretical construct. In practice it is often hard to draw a line between consideration and non-consideration of intersectionality. The complexity in drawing this line is for example shown by Christoffersen (2021), who has created a category of “applied concept” of intersectionality, which is called “multi-strand intersectionality” and is similar to our concept of “Diversity Equality Work/Measures”. It addresses “equality strands in parallel, separately yet simultaneously” (p.8) and has an “additive understanding of intersectionality” (p.9). At the same time, just like us, they argue that this concept “be *disassociated* from ‘intersectionality’” (p.4).

2.2.5 Gender Diversity Measures

We use the term “gender diversity measures” for any gender equality measures that explicitly regard there being more than two binary gender identities. This could be seen as self-evident and not needing an extra term, when recognizing gender per se as diverse and/or a continuum, but for the cause of this article we will need to make the distinction particularly visible.

2.2.6 Research Organizations

We use the term “research organizations” as an umbrella term for any institution in which research is performed, specifically universities as well as non-university research organizations.

2.3 Literature Use and State of Research

The topic of practical intersectional gender equality work in German research organizations is only very scarcely addressed in scientific literature so far. Discussions about what the concept of intersectionality means for feminist theory and practice however informed this article (e.g. Kurz 2022; AK ForschungsHandeln 2015; Do Mar Castro Varela, M. and Dhawan, N., ed., 2011) as well as literature on diversity equality work in research organizations, which also makes use of the concept of intersectionality (e.g. publications in Darowska 2019). For the topic of this article specifically we were able to find merely two publications: They were originally presented and referred to in the context of the annual conference of the bukof (Federal Conference of Women’s and Gender Equality Officers at universities in Germany) in 2022 with the topic “Gender Equality unites – Allyship in intersectional gender equality work.”. These works are Bitzan and Pöllman-Heller (2015) on intersectional gender equality work at technical universities in the STEM-field and Brötzmann and Pöllmann-Heller on intersectional approaches to support women at universities of applied sciences (2020). Overall, this shows that in the German landscape there is a severe lack of published materials that could guide practical intersectional gender equality work. This corresponds also to our survey findings. The relevant material we could to find was used to discuss the results of our survey - directly in each of the thematic sections.

At the EU-level, namely in the 2020 Communication “A new ERA for Research and Innovation”, the European Commission explicitly aims for an intersectional approach in gender equality policies. The need for an „opening [...] to intersections with other social categories, such as ethnicity, disability [...] and sexual orientation” is diagnosed and the goal of developing “inclusive gender equality plans” is thus formulated (European Commission 2020a). Accordingly, materials have been published on “inclusive gender equality plans” in the last years: the new approach is mentioned in the GEAR tool by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE 2023c) and most importantly a brochure on “Approaches to inclusive gender equality in research and innovation” (European Commission 2022) has been published which collects practical implementation examples from research organizations. However, though referring to the concept of intersectionality, the criteria for the choice of these examples do not necessarily follow an intersectional approach according to the scholarly definition we use for this article.

The brochure contains merely so-called Gender+-actions, which address gender and other dimensions, but not necessarily in intersection with each other, and so-called EDI approaches which foster equality, diversity and inclusion in a general way without addressing certain target groups. The measures in the first as well as in the second category can have an intersectional design, but only few of the examples in these categories in the brochure explicitly have. The discussion of the examples and strategies in the brochure seems unclear regarding the definition of the term “inclusive gender equality plans” and if and how exactly an intersectional approach is necessarily a part of it. Thus, we do not regard it as sufficient information on how to practically implement intersectional gender equality work. In our opinion the material can even be potentially confusing for inexperienced practitioners on what intersectionality or intersectional gender equality work exactly means. There are several insightful thoughts on aspects of intersectional approaches in the brochure however, which we used for this article.

There is a publication on the divergence of concepts of intersectionality, based on the understandings of intersectionality by gender equality practitioners in the UK - a phenomenon we, too, observe in the EU materials as well as in our survey results. Christoffersen (2021) finds five significantly different understandings of the concept, which they elaborate based on actual practices as well as practitioners’ reports on their practices. Three of the found concepts differ from scholars’ definition of intersectionality and should be disassociated with the concept, Christoffersen argues. Additionally, they find discrepancies between the reported and actually practiced concept of intersectionality (p. 3,4). Risks and chances of the different concepts as well as the effects of such a heterogeneous understanding of the concept are also discussed by Christoffersen (2021).

2.4 Our Position

As gender equality practitioners in a nationally and internationally renowned non-university research organization with regular participation in EU-funded projects, we try to stay up to date in the scientific discourse on gender equality – especially regarding practical gender equality work. It is also our aim to feed our practical experiences into the discourse and produce and share knowledge that from our experience is needed for practical gender equality work in research organizations. This means that this article is not only grounded in the survey results and in literature by other authors but also in our everyday experience and the resulting everyday life theories. This is made transparent wherever it applies.

2.5 The Survey

2.5.1 Intention and context

The motivation for creating a survey on the status of implementation of intersectional gender equality work in German research organizations was our observation that the concept of “intersectionality” is a big part of the current discourse in the German field of gender equality work and actors largely agree that it is an important and valuable concept - but there are only few examples of practical implementation and only few practice-oriented materials available. Thus, our intention was to get a data-based overview of the actual level of implementation, to find out about hindering factors and to ultimately contribute to the development and availability of knowledge on good practices and strategies in the field.

2.5.2 Questions

The survey asked, which other categories of difference were used in gender equality work in combination with gender, which basis these categories were defined on, if data collection is done for these categories – in combination or besides gender – and if the objectives and measures of the organization’s gender equality strategy are designed intersectionally. Furthermore, it collected descriptions of intersectional gender equality measures and inquired about problems and challenges of intersectional gender equality work.

2.5.3 Technical details

The survey was provided in a German and English. The English version was targeted at Gender Equality Actors without profound German language skills, mainly from the scientific field. We used LimeSurvey, hosted on our own Max Planck servers. The survey invitations were sent out in May 2022. The target group of the survey were persons in charge of gender equality policies in research organizations in Germany. Inside the Max Planck Society the survey was distributed to the Gender Equality Officers of the Max Planck Institutes. Other non-university research organizations were targeted through the AGbaF – Alliance of Gender Equality Officers of non-university. The gender equality actors of universities were contacted through a mailing list of the bukof – Federal Conference of Women’s and Gender Equality Officers of universities. The people who were contacted were accordingly those who were most networked with other organizations. This fits our aim of evaluating the state of implementation and state of knowledge in the German landscape of gender equality work in research organizations. Overall, the survey invitation was sent to 745 gender equality agents in German research organizations. The response rate was 5.6%, considering the 48 questionnaires that were

completed in full (29 by university representatives and 17 by colleagues from research organizations). Another 116 incomplete answers were received, but not counted for the quantitative results. The open text-answers of the incomplete submissions were, however, used in order to better understand the problems involved with implementing the concept and possible issues with answering the survey questions. We interpret the relatively low response rate and the high rate of non-completed surveys as firstly a symptom of our overall findings of a low implementation rate of intersectional gender equality work, which would lead to the fact that people feel that they cannot answer the questions (profoundly). A second possible reason could be the relatively high effort which was required to answer certain questions, especially in the second half of the survey. One of them required for example to list all intersectional measures in the organization and quickly describe each of them. This could have let persons to quit during the survey due to time constraints. Thirdly, we have to consider that there was critical feedback regarding the comprehensibility of the survey: three persons missed explanation of certain terms used (ID 419, 518, 572), one person stated that they found a part of the questions hard to answer (ID 569), another that the questions from her point of view were not clear enough (ID 518). We have to consider this when speaking about limitations of the survey and further research desiderata.

2.6 Data Analysis

In addition to the statistical analysis of the quantitative survey results, we applied the method of structuring content analysis according to Mayring (2019) to the open text answers and the comments collected in the survey, using an inductive approach in forming the system of categories out of the data itself. We then attributed all open-text answers to the developed categories. Subsequently we used the few existing literature on the topic to confirm, question or to bring more details or a different perspective to our results.

2.7 Limitations

The following limitations of our results have to be considered: Due to the low density of data in a part of the categories, some of the results can only be seen as data-based assumptions. We made this clear in the formulation of the results. Some of the discrepancies between targeted content of answers and actual answers, especially when it comes to understandings of intersectionality, might have resulted from misunderstandings of the questions, as already explained in 3.5.3 Technical details. We also discuss this in our results, especially when considering a possible lack of knowledge on the side of the respondents. In order to counteract these limitations and reach a better validity of data, a research desideratum would be to test our results in group discussions with gender equality practitioners.

3 Results: Overview

According to the survey results, categories of difference considered in gender equality work – in combination with gender - by at least half of the participants are “scientific vs. science-supporting personnel” (79%), “sexual orientation” (71%), “age” (63%), “ethnic diversity” (58%), “disability and impairment” (58%) and “social origin” (58%). “Religion” (38%) and other categories (specified by the participants: “care obligations”, “physical characteristics like height and weight”, “language”, “position in the organization”) were less frequently named.

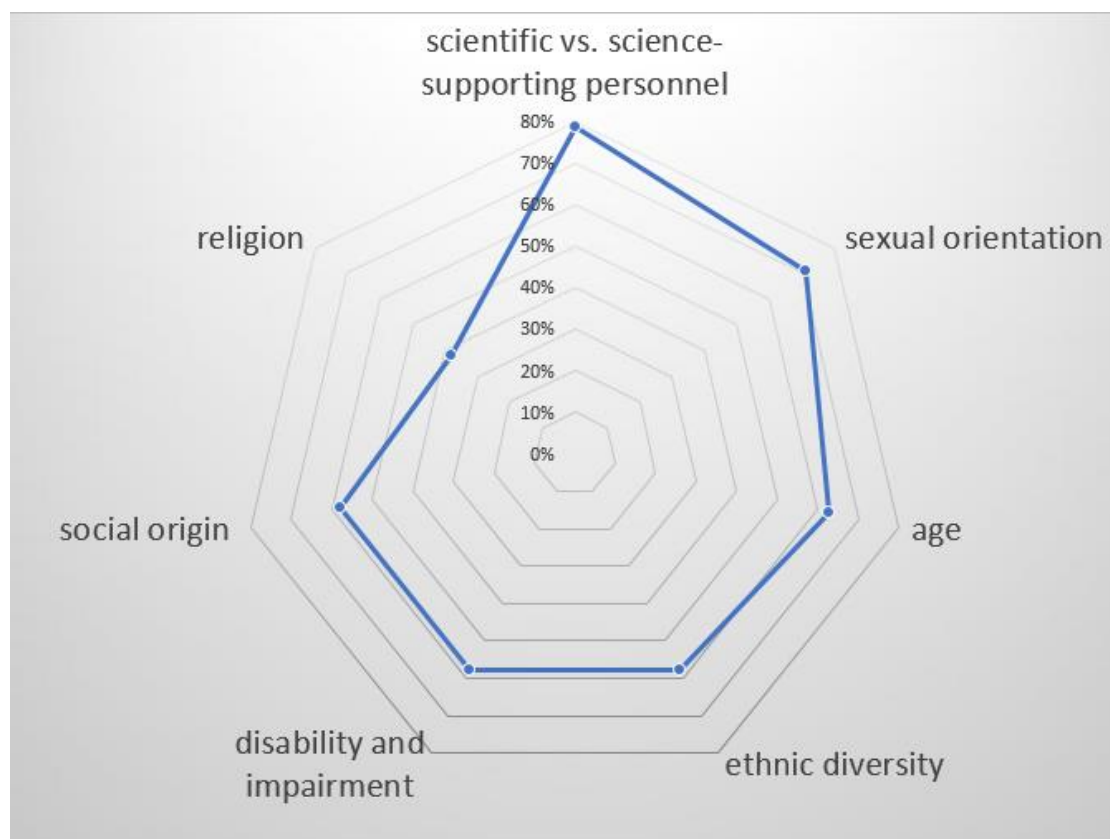


Figure 1: What personal and social characteristics as reasons for privilege and discrimination do you integrate into your gender equality work?

The selection of the target groups of gender equality work is in the majority of cases done in a top-down, non-data-based approach: it follows the understanding of diversity defined by the organization (54%), commonly known diversity categories (48%) or categories of the German General Equal Treatment Act (AGG) (42%). Practicability was another prominent reason for the choice of categories (31%), still with more mentions than analysis of the staff (27%). Other basis for the selection included “previously neglected talent pools” (21%) and further elements (19%), among others “literature”, “need-based selection”, “self-reporting”, “observations” and “task sharing with other entities”.

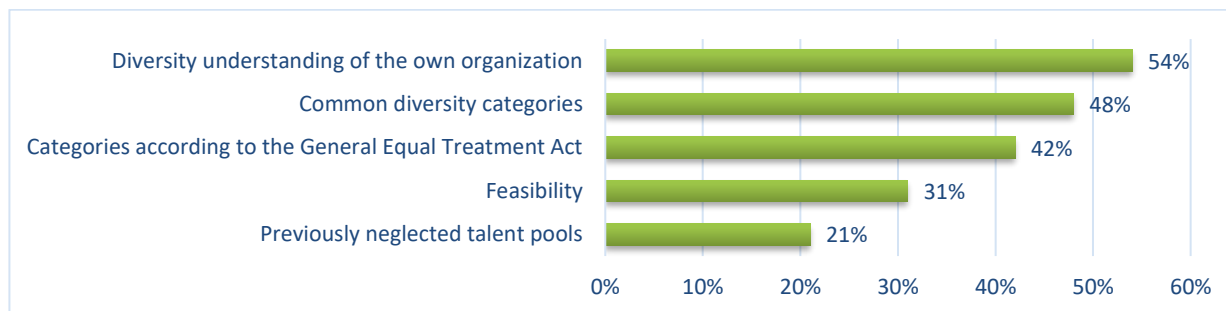


Figure 2: How did you select the target groups?

Correspondingly, 49% of the participants say that they do not collect data on the categories of difference that they consider in combination with gender, while 23% do collect this data connected with gender and 11% independently from gender. 31% of the participants say that the objectives of their organizations' gender equality strategy follow intersectionally-defined objectives, while almost half of them say that intersectionally-designed measures are part of their gender equality strategy. Several statements make it clear that in many cases the organizations are still in the process of determining needs and target groups for intersectional gender equality work (IDs 233, 359). The intersectional design of gender monitoring, if it is considered at all, is also still in the design phase (ID 572). In analyzing the results of the questions on intersectional objectives, measures and monitoring, it has to be considered that the validity of the answers to these specific questions cannot be regarded as high, due to the fact that during the further analysis of the data, it became clear that a considerable part of the participants does not seem to share the common understanding of intersectional gender equality work (see also chapter 2 for definitions). This became clear especially in the survey question on intersectionally-designed gender equality measures: 22 out of the 36 reported measures – as far as we could tell from the entered information - do not meet the common definitions of intersectionality (see chapter 4.4). Instead, we would categorize them as gender diversity measures, diversity equality measures or gender-only equality measures according to the terms and definitions as explained in chapter 2. The 14 measures that corresponded to common definitions of intersectionality were submitted by only eight of the 48 survey participants.

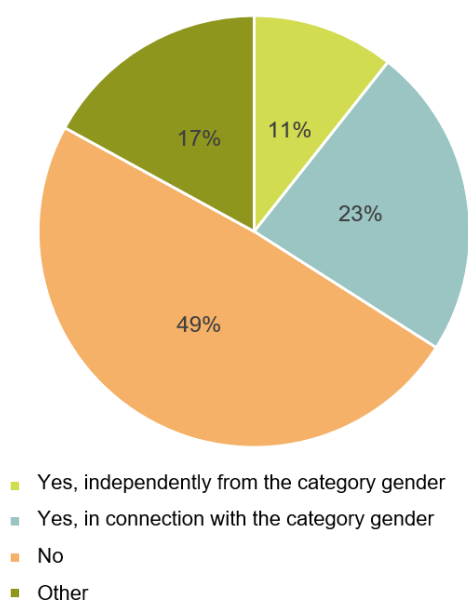


Figure 3: Do you collect data for the characteristics being considered?

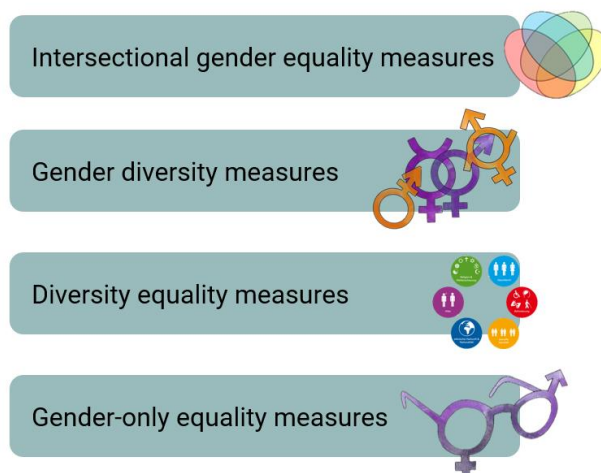


Figure 4: Categorization of submitted measures

Overall, we thus see a low level of implementation of intersectionality in practical gender equality work in German research organizations. This corresponds with the European Commissions (2022) findings that “in Europe actions that address characteristics other than gender are in the early stages of development” (p.6), that “statements relating to equality and diversity, particularly among RFOs and RPOs were not always supported by clearly identifiable actions” (p.34) and that “Intersectionality was acknowledged as a concept and in general terms [...], but it was less significant or explicit in the actual design of actions” (p. 35).

The last question of our survey was on challenges and problems of intersectional gender equality work, in open-text format. The answers – in combination with open text comments to other questions – will be used in the following to answer our central question: Which are the obstacles that lead to the current lack of implementation of an intersectional approach in practical gender equality work? And what is needed to overcome them?

4 Results: Challenges and Problems of the Implementation of an Intersectional Gender Equality Strategy

4.1 Data Availability versus Demand for Evidence-based Approach

A major issue that hampers the implementation of intersectional gender equality strategies in research organizations in Germany seems to be the low data availability. The quantitative survey results show that 49% of the participants do not have any data available on the categories of difference they consider in combination with gender (see Fig. 2). The open-text answers on challenges and problems of intersectional gender equality work confirm that this is a dominant problem: difficulties in collecting data are the most mentioned item in this section. As reasons the participants mention the small data samples that result from the intersectional combination of categories of difference. This leads to problems in statistical relevance as well as in anonymization and hence data protection (IDs 179, 242, 263, 272, 419, 572). This problem is even more relevant in small organizations (ID 572). At the same time, it seems to be clear for the agents that a data-based status quo assessment is a prerequisite of gender equality work: “Until we know about possible problem areas, needs or structural problems, we can hardly continue to work.” (ID 89). It becomes clear that the gender equality agents would like to act but are thwarted by the lack of data (ID 71). This result makes sense: the necessity to collect data as one of the first steps of designing a gender equality strategy (e.g., written down in a gender equality plan), be it intersectional or not, is conveyed by all common literature and manuals on the subject, such as for example the well-known GEAR-tool by EIGE (EIGE 2023a). Additionally, the research project „MINT-Strategien 4.0 – Strategien zur Gewinnung von Frauen für MINT-Studiengänge an Hochschulen für angewandte Wissenschaften⁷¹“, one of the few works that discuss practical issues of the implementation of an intersectional approach in gender equality work, stresses the importance of data collection as the basis of target group selection (Brötzmann and Pöllmann-Heller 2020). But which work-arounds do the gender equality agents then choose for their selection of intersectional target groups? Only one participant reports that an alternative way of data collection was used: documenting the needs that were expressed by participants of a mentoring program (ID 263). In most of the other cases the definition of target groups is instead done non-data-based and top down, as already presented in the main results: the target groups are defined according to the diversity understandings of the organizations, or the German General Equal Treatment Act or simply based on common diversity categories. This could be a typically German

⁷¹ “STEM-Strategien 4.0 – Strategies for the recruitment of women in STEM-degree programs at universities of applied sciences” (translated by the authors)

phenomenon, as also Kaufmann (2019) states that diversity processes in German universities were initiated not as bottom-up processes from grassroots movements but from the level of university management and research funding organizations, in projects such as “Vielfalt als Chance” (“Diversity as a Chance”) in the year 2010 or the project “Ungleich besser!” (“Better not the same!”) by the Stifterverband Deutsche Wissenschaft (Donors' Association for German Science).

4.2 Overburden of Gender Equality Agents

Also apparent from the open-text answers of the survey are considerable demands of an intersectional gender equality strategy that tend to overwhelm and overburden the gender equality agents. Most answers connect this to the complexity of the concept, e.g. “There are many many dimensions to consider and they are never discrete.” (ID 452), “Difficulty in focusing on topics, working in a focused and goal-oriented manner” (ID 560), “Higher complexity also means more difficult to objectify the criteria” (ID 575). Other reasons mentioned are that the “normal” gender-only equality work is already very difficult and has been met with resistances so that the development towards an intersectional approach is not imaginable or feasible (IDs 467, 416). Furthermore, there is a lack of resources for gender equality work (IDs 254, 263, 335, 503, 560), a lack of expertise and good practice examples (IDs 455, 575) and the awareness-raising for other categories than gender has to start from scratch (ID 263). The lack of sufficient data to identify specific target groups also contributes to the strain on the gender equality agents by making it difficult to “to set thematic priorities” (ID 560) and to weigh up the different categories against each other. The problem of defining categories, between the risk of exclusion on the one hand and arbitrariness on the other, has been widely discussed, e.g., in Kurz (2022, pp.56-58). Besides this obvious complexity, we will, in the following, dive deeper into the background of why intersectional gender equality work is overwhelming and difficult for many gender equality agents to implement and what this has to do with the current practices and structures in gender equality work in Germany.

4.3 Routines Shaken: Clash with the Established Gender Equality Work

It becomes clear that the development towards an intersectional gender equality work means to question former matter of course-routines. The **clear separation of agents and responsibilities** in organizations is challenged – as intersectionality forms a starting point for transgression of distinct limits between the categories. For the gender equality agents this process is very challenging – especially on the background of already scarce resources and sometimes lack of support by the leadership, seen in the survey through the participants’ report of responsibility being clearly separated between agents, of distribution struggles, of safeguarding of vested rights and resources (IDs 575, 161), of

competing demands (ID 98) and of even being played off against each other by the leadership (ID 338) and therefore an unwillingness to cooperate. We see a fear that the “classical” or gender-only equality work could suffer in the process of adopting an intersectional approach. It could be “blurred” (ID 317) or „diluted“ (ID 512); the basics could be „lost sight of” (ID 464). The authors of the “MINTersectionality” study from 2015 received similar results on worries and conflicts regarding the potential connection between gender and other categories of difference in their survey among gender researchers and gender equality agents. The results were consequently discussed with gender equality agents in a workshop. Most of the participants were in favor of an integration of gender and diversity, but according to them, the risk of the category gender fading in the background should be counteracted and gender equality agents should not be obliged to take on diversity work additional to their legally defined duties, especially not without additional resources (Bitzan and Pöllman-Heller, 2015, 20 - 22).

Some gender equality agents also fear that identifying and targeting intersectionally-discriminated groups could result in **reproducing stereotypes and stigmatizations** - by stressing the differences between the groups (IDs 524, 419, 578, 548). One of the participants is convinced that explicit addressing of a group affected by multi-discrimination is counterproductive (ID 455). Another stresses that this is a general dilemma of their work: “Characteristics that we want to ‘overcome’ must be ‘emphasized’ in our work [...]” (ID 548). The worry about the potential of stigmatization in the context of intersectional approaches has also been expressed by “many” (Bitzan and Pöllmann-Heller 2015, p.12⁷²) of the researchers and gender equality agents, that participated in the “MINTersectionality” study. The results of the “MINT-Strategien 4.0” study also specifically discusses this dilemma and therefore calls for an approach to diversity, that is “reflexive, sensitive to differences and inequalities” (Brötzmann and Pöllmann-Heller 2020, p.11). Interesting to us is that the dilemma of dramatization of categories and differences in gender equality work as well as in diversity equality work is well-known in the German professional discourse and the strategies of dramatization, de-dramatization and non-dramatization are discussed as vital parts of one common approach. In this context each of the strategies is acknowledged to have its time, place, and purpose. Generally, there seems to be a common agreement that in fields lacking awareness for a certain kind of discrimination and bias, dramatization is the first step which cannot be left out and lays the basis for a more equal working culture that then can also benefit from strategies of de- and non-dramatization. Part of this discourse also involves strategies on how to deal with the inherent risks of the strategy (e.g., Debus 2012). That this discussion has been renewed in view of intersectional gender equality work confirms once more that routines seem to have been fundamentally shaken and that the approach

⁷² Citation from German publications has been translated by the authors with the help of DeepL.

is seen not only as gradual, but fundamentally new, and that all former assumptions tend now to be questioned. This tangibly explains why the approach is such a challenge for gender equality agents.

In this context not only the basic tools of gender equality agents, but their very **self-conception seems to be challenged**. We can already see hints to that in the survey. It begins with an insecurity, whether an intersectional approach is covered by the legal basis of gender equality work in German research organizations (IDs 158, 230, 233, 572, 575). Furthermore, the gender equality agents question whether an intersectional approach fits with the conception and/or the name of their office (IDs 71, 158). This leads to a general uncertainty regarding the implementation of the concept. In our opinion, this insecurity is not (only) a question of formality and law, but originates from a fundamental questioning of the conception of the political subject “woman” and the development from a formerly explicit or implicit affected-persons approach (as most of the gender equality agent themselves in Germany are women) to making politics for and representing interests also of groups differently positioned than the gender equality agents themselves. This fundamental change is also discussed in German gender research literature as the “question of the (im)possibility of a collective feminist we” (Kurz 2022, p.75): Is it possible for intersectional feminist approaches to emphasize differences of women but still reference ‘women’ as a collective? “Or is it instead a political, ideological ‘we’ that is based on shared goals rather than shared identities or experiences [...]?” (Kurz 2022, p.76) What becomes apparent are the “challenges for privileged women*” (Kurz 2022, p.96) in the effort for intersectional feminist action. She references a study by Schuster 2016, which elaborates that “intersectional expectations” (Schuster 2016, p.4) put lots of pressure on privileged women to consider differences between women and reflect their own positioning, while it remains largely unclear how to put these expectations concretely into practice. Reflecting on this result, Schuster summarizes that “intersectionality should not be fetishized to such an extent that young feminists become too afraid to act collectively” (Schuster, 2016, p.6), while of course not giving up to consider needs of less privileged groups. At the same time, the necessity of reflecting one’s own standpoint and involvement in the reproduction of inequalities and social positioning in society is stressed as a prerequisite for diversity sensitive action throughout literature in the field (e.g. Smykalla & Vinz 2011; AK ForschungsHandeln 2015, do Mar Castro Varela & Dhawan 2011). In summary, we can say that the goal of adopting an intersectional approach in gender equality work leads gender equality agents not only to question their strategies and tools, and the self-conception of their roles but also their view of the world that has been shaped by their upbringing and development within a certain societal position – even more than their gender-only equality work might have already done before.

4.4 Lack of Professionalization of Intersectional Gender Equality Work

Besides obviously great challenges produced by the approach of intersectionality per se, we also see limiting factors that originate from the lack of professionalization in how these challenges are met in the German research organizations.

One participant addresses these limits very frankly when asked about problems and challenges of intersectional gender equality work: "Gender equality work takes place primarily on a voluntary basis - a wide range of tasks cannot be fully performed, professionalization can only be achieved up to a certain limit in a voluntary position, this may not be sufficient." (ID 335) Many other participants confirm that a lack of personnel resources is an important problem regarding the implementation of intersectional gender equality work (IDs 254, 263, 335, 503, 560). We cannot tell if these were also submitted by gender equality agents that rely only on voluntary work.

In connection to the lack of personnel resources, the participants criticize that the structure of responsibilities in their organizations is not fit for intersectional work: the designation of responsibilities for different diversity categories is either clearly separated and cooperation is difficult, or there are no persons responsible for other categories than gender (or mostly disability). Furthermore, there seems to be resistances to change, either from the leadership or from the agents themselves (IDs 338, 569).

Many obstructing aspects we see in the survey, such as a lack of common understanding and knowledge, a lack of good practices and materials and a lack of agreement regarding the legal basis of an intersectional approach, could originate in or at least be related to that lack of resources and sufficient professional structures: the work is done to always "just fill the gaps" - comprehensive intersectional work is not possible due to resource constraints" (ID 263).

A striking result from the survey is that many of the gender equality agents do not seem to share, know about or follow common definitions of intersectionality in answering the survey questions. 22 out of the 36 reported measures, when asked about "measures designed to be intersectional", do not contain any intersectional element – at least apparent to us from its description. Two other categories of measures are reported here in particular: Gender diversity measures, so measures that are designed or open for persons of other genders than cisgender women and/or men, and diversity measures that have elements considering categories of difference other than gender, but not in combination/interaction with gender.

We must consider that probably not all survey participants who submitted measures, which did not meet the criteria of intersectionality, actually do not know about common definitions of intersectionality. It might also be a problem of not understanding the question or not being motivated to follow the instructions properly. There were also three

comments to the survey which stated that the questions were hard to answer (IDs 419, 569) and one that a definition of “intersectional gender equality work” would have been useful (ID 419). These were not, however, participants that submitted non-intersectional measures and this presumably does not explain why over half of the answers do not meet the criteria. In combination with answers that mention a lack of knowledge and expertise as one of the problems and challenges of the implementation of intersectional gender equality work (IDs 263, 335, 407), or the lack of experience and good practice examples (IDs 71, 455, 575), we can say for sure that there is a considerable backlog in the expertise needed to successfully design and implement an intersectional approach in gender equality work. The survey result on the legal basis of intersectional gender equality work supports this hypothesis: One participant is convinced that financial resources from a major German public gender equality funding program (“Professorinnenprogramm”) cannot be used for intersectional gender equality measures (ID 431), while another participant reports on a whole palette of corresponding measures that were implemented in the framework of exactly that program (ID 572). One participant seems to mix gender diversity with intersectional gender equality work when they state that it is a problem for intersectional gender equality work that the “legal mandate is clearly formulated in binary terms” (ID 233), another mixes it with diversity equality, when they state that it is a problem for intersectional gender equality work that according to the law they are only a women’s representative (ID 158).

4.5 Summary Challenges and Problems of the Implementation of an Intersectional Gender Equality Strategy

The problems in the implementation of an intersectional approach in gender equality work can be summed up as a mismatch between requirements and available resources: the complexity of the concept challenges the routines and practices in gender equality work in a fundamental way. The political subject of its efforts must be re-conceptualized with significant consequences for the self-conception of the gender equality agents and their practical work. There are also new and more complex demands regarding data collection which so far are hard to fulfill for the organizations. Goals, strategies, measures, and addressed target groups must be revised. On the other hand, the personnel/time resources of gender equality agents to manage these tasks, train themselves and reflect on their role are often scarce and are already at their limits due to the demands of “classical” gender-only equality work. Resistances and organizational structures with distinctly separate responsibilities for different diversity categories and a sometimes-competitive atmosphere do not help either. Additionally, there is a lack of good practice examples, manuals or easily accessible training for how to practically implement an intersectional approach in gender equality work.

So, what can be done to improve the situation?

This will be answered in two ways:

First, we will present what we learnt from the survey about strategies to successfully implement intersectionality in gender equality work and make use of the relatively small number good practice examples that were submitted.

Secondly – based on the survey results and our own practical experience – we will make suggestions what could help to untie knots and solve mismatches that currently block progress in the implementation process.

5 Results: Strategies for Intersectionality used by Practitioners

Despite the low overall level of implementation of intersectional gender equality work, the survey submissions provided us with an exemplary set of intersectional gender equality measures from those organizations which are more advanced in the implementation process. The portrayed measures were solely chosen by determining if they can be categorized as intersectional gender equality measures (see 2.2 Terms). From the information contained in the survey results, we cannot judge their effectiveness, which is why we refrain to call them “good practices”. In the following, we portray the chosen examples grouped by the underlying strategy that was used. The strategies have different prerequisites and levels of complexity.

5.1 Strategies for Identifying Needs of Intersectionally-discriminated Groups

Three different strategies can be found in the survey answers for gender equality actors to identify needs of intersectionally-discriminated groups:

Extending the gender monitoring to an intersectional analysis is the most advanced and demanding option for identifying needs but, at the same time, the most effective one as it can also be used to monitor the success of measures. Only one of the survey participants mentioned that this was planned in their organization – a university, which has been funded by a federal gender equality program (Professorinnenprogramm III) and has a position specifically dedicated to gender monitoring (ID 572). Nonetheless, 23% of the overall participants also collect some kind of data on gender in combination with at least one other category, not always, however, in such a structured way (see Fig. 2).

Exchanging with advocates of other discriminated groups has been identified as one of the first and basic steps towards an intersectional approach by several participants (IDs 158, 161, 560). Usually this is done by collaborating in working groups but learning about needs and reflecting about the situation of persons on the intersection of gender

and other categories can also be done informally with the advocates for the other categories. This can also help to get in touch with diverse target groups and lay a basis for further collaboration, for example in advertising intersectional measures.

Other alternative, low-threshold methods to collect data have only been mentioned once in the survey, though it seems fruitful to us to use alternative sources for data collection, with a low threshold and less requirements than the collection of statistical data or a fully realized gender monitoring process. One example is mentioned in the survey: here the needs of a certain intersectionally-discriminated target group were identified by documenting what affected persons shared about their problems in a mentoring program (ID 263).

5.2 Strategies for Intersectional Measure Design

Targeting intersectionally-discriminated groups specifically is certainly one of the clearest strategies, though not necessarily the most effective or the easiest to implement in every situation. Examples submitted by the survey participants were support for women with disabilities on their way to a professorship (PhD and Postdoc-contracts) (ID 419), support for female students with disabilities (in cooperation with the Inclusion Officer) (ID 455), a mentoring program for female students in STEM with a migration background (ID 548), coaching for women with a physical or mental impairment, from abroad or with care duties that make compatibility with their job difficult⁷³ (ID 575). Additionally, the gender equality agents that participated in the workshops of the MINTersectionality study acknowledged that when differences in needs are identified, specific programs for specific groups are necessary (Bitzan & Pöllman-Heller, 2015, p.31).

Integrating elements designed for an intersectionally-discriminated group in a general measure (for women in general or for another group in general) is an alternative option, which might need less resources and lead to good integration of the specific groups. However, it could also be more difficult to create a safe space for the intersectionally-discriminated group. One survey participant, for example, reported that their mentoring program for all female PhD students specifically targets female first-generation students and participants are invited to reflect on the effects of family educational background (ID 572). Obviously, it could also be done the other way around and a unit specifically for women could be integrated in a measure for first generation students.

⁷³ The last group of women has been targeted by reconciliation measures since the beginning of gender equality work. We counted the submission of measures in this field as intersectional if they were specifically targeted at women. Though not being especially innovative or new, we acknowledge that the combination of female gender and care duties has a completely different effect than the combination of male gender and care duties for the experience and possible discrimination of the person – which makes it an intersectional topic.

Favoring intersectionally-discriminated persons in selection processes for general measures is a way to specifically support intersectionally-discriminated groups, but without targeting their specific needs. One example for this strategy was submitted: a mentoring program for female, trans* and non-binary master students. In the selection procedure, first generation students, students with a migration background or with care responsibilities are favored (ID 572).

Promotion of measures specifically among intersectionally-discriminated groups can be done for measures with intersectional target groups as well as for general measures. To reflect on how to specifically reach intersectionally-discriminated groups when promoting a measure is valuable, it could be that you have to reconsider your methods and channels of promotion and think more from the point of diverse target groups – perhaps on the basis on learning more about their experience and where they get information from/which places they visit/what could be appealing to them, etc.. The promotion of a mentoring program for female PhD students is, for example, specifically targeted at first generation students (ID 572) or a measure for female students with a disability is also distributed on the mailing list of the Inclusion Officer (ID 455).

Designing measures and procedures in an inclusive way can promote the integration of an intersectionally-discriminated group and can be resource-efficient, but on the other hand might not be able to meet needs that are very specific to an intersectional target group or to create a dedicated safe space. In practice it means to design general measures in the most inclusive way possible regarding all aspects of its design, such as accessibility, diversity in methods, representation of diverse groups (for example among the trainers or contact points or in the promotion of the measure) and so on. This strategy is mentioned several times in the survey: One participant mentions that it is important that "as far as possible, all programs [are] bilingual, so that everyone understands them and feels that they are being addressed" (ID 71). Another reports that their family parties do not adhere to the Christian holidays (ID 95). Inclusive measure-design is also mentioned as a general strategy: "barrier-free and appealing also for minorities" (ID 71). More generally it is stated that "an intersectional perspective should be adopted in the design so as not to exclude anyone." (ID 572) It seems that this strategy is seen as a workaround solution or a substitute as the same participant explains in this context that this is especially important as in their organization "not all interventions can be executed intersectionally to target specific groups and/or reach a large enough target group" (ID 572). Another gender equality agent explains that an inclusive design of gender equality measures is applied as otherwise – due to a lack of data, the fear of stigmatization and small target groups – they feel "unable to act" (ID 419) and therefore portrays this strategy as not so demanding. Based on the statement of another participant – who describes this approach as a general strategy, not only for measure-design – we on the other hand see

this strategy as a very basic principal of intersectional gender equality work – not only a workaround. “Make processes, procedures and workflows equally accessible to all people” (ID 16) therefore seems to us a central motto. We agree that this approach is beneficial due to avoiding stigmatization while also being suitable for target groups that would otherwise be too small for specific measures. The assumption that data on the experiences of intersectionally-discriminated target groups is not needed for that strategy, however, seems to us as a misconception.

Conveying intersectional perspectives in gender/diversity awareness measures can be done without many prerequisites besides a trainer with intersectional expertise. A measure which uses this strategy, for example, is training of student tutors at a university: It “sensitizes the students regarding different diversity categories, their intersectional entanglements and how they can work in the university context. In their role as tutors, initial impulses are given for reflecting on privileges and disadvantages.” (ID 572).

Targeting anti-discrimination measures at multi-discrimination is another potentially effective element of an intersectional gender equality work as it re-defines the target of anti-discrimination measures to specifically incorporate and address multi-discrimination. This is being done by one of the survey participants by sensitization of the anti-discrimination counselling unit and offering information on intersectional dynamics of discrimination on their website (ID 572). Another example is to sensitize the members of selection committees not only to unconscious bias regarding single categories of difference but also to their intersectional interaction (ID 572).

5.3 Consciously Sticking to One Category

One other strategy which we want to discuss in this context is to consciously stick to one category of difference as the target of a measure. One participant discusses this as a matter of “practicality [that] sometimes demands sticking to one category, such as gender, race or disability” (ID 140). Sadly, we do not have any further details on the reasons that led the participant to regard this solution as the only practical. But in general, we regard this as a natural part of an overall intersectional approach: if a measure is targeted at a group whose specific needs correspond to only one specific category of difference, it is of course legitimate to design it for this target group - while still being aware of the diversity among this target group, which would lead us back to, for example, strategy 5 “Designing measures and procedures in an inclusive way”.

6 Suggestions for Further Professionalization

In this chapter we would like to present what we learnt about prerequisites for a further professionalization of intersectional gender equality work – which would enable a more consistent and successful implementation of the concept.

6.1 Sufficient Resources

One of the main results of the survey is a significant lack of resources to ensure a successful implementation of an intersectional approach due to its complexity and level of demand – especially but not exclusively in the process of first implementation.

6.1.1. Personnel resources

Sufficient personnel resources are the central key to a successful transformation towards intersectional gender equality work due to the level of demand regarding knowledge, awareness, self-reflection and re-conceptualization of monitoring, objectives, and measures. Many gender equality agents, however, work on a voluntary basis with little relief or personnel support. It must be made clear to the leaderships of research organizations that without sufficient personnel resources, a state of the art and effective gender equality strategy, which in our opinion requires an intersectional approach, is not feasible.

6.1.2. Theoretical and practical knowledge

Collecting and sharing, above all, practical knowledge on intersectional gender equality work is, additionally to theoretical knowledge, the most important element to enable gender equality agents to successfully implement the approach. A common effort must be made to remedy the lack of accessible expertise on concrete and practical implementation strategies by sharing good practice examples, creating manuals, offering talks and workshops and opportunities for exchange at networking events.

6.1.3. Advanced trainings on diversity competencies

Also helpful would be, in our opinion, for gender equality agents to improve their general diversity competencies, which enables them to be more sensitive to the needs of diverse and intersectionally-discriminated target groups, to get a better insight in their experience, and to better address them. Helpful could be, for example, to take part in intercultural training, to improve foreign language skills, and to read or hear about stories and experiences directly from affected persons.

6.2 Rethinking Allyship

In order to overcome the challenge of re-defining the political subject of gender equality work in an intersectional way it is necessary for the gender equality agents to rethink their self-conception and especially their concept of allyship: for many of the agents it is completely new to target not only the group of “women”, which they themselves usually belong to and for whom they feel naturally comfortable advocating, but also groups which they are not part of themselves and that may feel more or less foreign to them. Following Schuster’s diagnosis that expectations of “correct” intersectional action can result in a fear to act at all (Schuster 2016, pp.4-6), which we would also call a fear of one’s own cultural imperialism, we would suggest reacting with a strengthened professionalization of gender equality work and the following strategies:

6.2.1 Reflecting own positioning and improve diversity awareness

Fearing one’s own cultural imperialism, one’s own racist, homophobic, ableist, lookist, and in other ways biased socialization is a first step and prerequisite for this step – but has to be used for a productive reflection of one’s own positioning in society, one’s own privileges, their consequences and how to use them in a way to be – in the best case – an effective ally. This process can be helped by diversity training and learning more about the experiences of persons affected by discrimination based on other categories than gender or by multi-discrimination.

6.2.2 Putting aside concerns about contact, collaboration and professional advocacy

Hesitation to get in contact and work together with advocates and groups of affected persons of other diversity categories should be overcome in favor of a new understanding of professional advocacy. As a gender equality agent, you have to be able to also advocate the needs of groups of intersectionally-discriminated groups that you do not belong to yourself.

6.2.3 Evidence-based practice

Evidence-based practice is important for the legitimation and success of this advocacy, thus being able to identify needs of groups not based on personal experience, personal belief or single reports but being able to base the gender equality strategy on specifically and methodically collected data. As this is reported to be very difficult in a quantitative way, qualitative data collection can fill the gap. Here anonymization can be handled in a different way also when dealing with small groups of people. Interviews and group discussions, but also the documentation of counselling requests or complaints can be considered. A similar advice is given by the European Commission (2022): “the perceived

lack of data should not be used as an impediment for action” (p.33) and “whilst small numbers can be an issue, [...] qualitative analysis can enable the development of robust intersectional evidence” (p. 35).

6.2.4 Thinking and acting in alliances among equality agents

An important part of rethinking allyship in the aforementioned way can be to form and act in alliances with other equality agents, especially inside, but also outside of institutions, such as inclusion officers, anti-racism initiatives, queer alliances etc.. Going into competition with each other or letting yourselves be played off against each other might be what the scarce resources and questioned responsibilities automatically lead to. But in the end, we are all fighting the same battle and collaboration is more important than ever when implementing an intersectional approach, for the sake of self-reflection, for learning about the experience of diverse groups, for data collection, for the organization, the financing, and the promotion of measures and, last but not least, for demanding sufficient resources for equality work together.

7 Summary: Intersectionality as an Analytical Tool for Effective Gender Equality Strategy

“Intersectionality” is being used as a buzzword to signal a progressive gender equality strategy. It stands for something completely new, for a paradigmatic change. As there is little concrete experience of its implementation thus far, the concept remains open to interpretation and evokes fantasies. Additionally, it is often mixed up with other major developments in gender equality work: the extension of the target group to all genders and the confrontation with an upcoming diversity work in organizations. This whole development seems to induce confusion and a feeling of being overwhelmed – especially when not having the necessary resources at hand to meet the challenge. We have to take into account that intersectionality means a fundamental change of thinking about target groups, the political subject of one’s work, the self-conception as a gender equality agent and advocate and/or ally, but at the same time we also want to de-mystify the approach and counteract its overwhelming aura: Reminding ourselves of EIGE’s definition, intersectionality is basically an “Analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which sex and gender intersect with other personal characteristics/identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination” (EIGE 2023b and also European Commission 2022, p. 35). The purpose of an intersectional approach is consequently making gender equality strategies more effective, making visible those who need help the most and leaving no one behind.

As important and fundamental as this purpose is, in our opinion intersectionality remains an analytical tool to improve and re-tune, sometimes even revolutionize the existing gender equality strategy – but is not a completely new strategy in itself. In view of the insecurities and conflicts of requirements and resources that we have seen in the survey, this could be helpful to bear in mind. The approach needs a certain professional implementation, but in order to not get overwhelmed or risk not tackling the task at all, it can be practiced as a gradual and step by step change. We have shown, for example, that it is valuable not to abandon well-proven strategies and apply them also to an intersectional approach⁷⁴, that designing completely new measures is not the only successful strategy but also to re-design otherwise well-proven measures in an inclusive way or to implement elements targeted at intersectional target groups in general measures. It is also essential not to get thwarted by the fear of one's own cultural imperialism and instead use low threshold ways of data collection in order to create a first basis for an evidence-based approach and to make use of contact to other equality agents and the inherent synergies. In conclusion, our main result would be the need to remove the overwhelming aura of intersectionality and the inhibitions to act due to fear of contact with persons with different discriminatory experiences and a different position in society. We also have to improve the availability of resources in order to meet the requirements of the implementation. Therefore, it could be helpful to provide concrete manuals and good practice examples that make the concept tangible and offer concrete steps to de-mystify the concept while helping its professionalization. We hope our work can contribute to this goal. We are fully aware and want to stress that even the greatest efforts in this field will not be of much use without robust funding of gender and diversity equality work in German research organizations. Regarding further research a validation of our results in group discussions with gender equality practitioners as well as further data collection on how to gain the support of the organization's leadership for intersectional gender equality work - as the most important prerequisite for its success - would be valuable.

⁷⁴ like for example strategies to dramatize but also de-dramatize categories of difference to avoid stigmatization

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