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# LEADING AT THE INTERSECTIONS:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH MODEL FOR POLICY & SOCIAL CHANGE

C. Nicole Mason, PhD

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THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH MODEL  
FOR POLICY & SOCIAL CHANGE

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Leading at the Intersections: An Introduction to the Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change* was developed and written by C. Nicole Mason, Research Assistant Professor and Executive Director of the Women of Color Policy Network at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

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## CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Mission & Affiliates	2
Introduction	4
What Is Intersectionality?	5
The Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change	6
Starting Assumptions of the Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change	7
Forms of Intersectionality	8
Violence against Women	10
Markers of Difference	12
Mono-causal vs. Multi-causal Frameworks	13
Macro & Micro Levels of Discrimination	14
Policy Change Using the Intersectional Approach Model	18
Agenda Setting & Issue Framing	21
Social Change & Organizing Using the Intersectional Approach Model	23
References & Suggested Readings	25
Working Definitions	26

## ABOUT US

Founded in 2000 by Walter Stafford as part of the Roundtable of Institutions of People of Color, the **Women of Color Policy Network**, an affiliate of the Research Center for Leadership in Action at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service is the country's only research and policy institute focusing on women of color at a nationally ranked top ten public policy school. The Network conducts original research and collects critical data on women of color that is used to inform public policy outcomes at the local, state and national levels. The Network also serves as a hub for women of color scholars, leaders and practitioners.

### ORIGINAL & INFORMED RESEARCH

The Women of Color Policy Network is home to the country's largest and most comprehensive data repository on racial and ethnic minority women. Our research reports and policy briefs help create public policies that work for women, families and communities.

### MEANINGFUL POLICY ANALYSIS

The Network works hand in hand with elected officials, scholars and community advocates to ensure that the voices and concerns of women of color are reflected in policy. Our analysis is geared toward not only understanding the extent of a social problem, but generating strategies and solutions to help relieve disparities and increase access.

### AFFILIATE SCHOLARS & PRACTITIONERS PROGRAM

The Affiliate Scholars and Practitioners program at the Network provides an elevated platform for the highest quality research produced by scholars and practitioners on issues related to economic and human security, health disparities, education and leadership development. Network affiliate scholars and practitioners are leading experts in public service, government and academia committed to critically engaging pressing social issues and strategizing about ways to work across sectors and communities of practice to advance inclusive public policies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social change leaders, policy advocates and nonprofit organizations spend a significant amount of time in response mode. We work diligently to address a social problem or issue with less thought as to how the problem came to be in the first place. We tend to focus on the immediate needs of groups and communities rather than the structures and systems that have created the problem or erected significant barriers to getting the problem solved.

Existing social problems and issues are made worse or compounded by public policies that do not take into consideration the needs of communities or fail to address the structures and systems that maintain inequalities and discrimination.

Over the last three decades, we have learned a tremendous amount about organizing for social and policy change. One of the most valuable lessons is that for authentic change to happen, we must be mindful of our frameworks and approaches to movement-building and advocacy efforts.

***Leading at the Intersections: An Introduction to the Intersectional Model for Policy & Social Change*** calls on all of us—from the small grassroots organization to the mighty foundation to legislators—to shift our frame and the way we think about social and policy change. It is a starting point and a tool to begin the conversation of how we turn this important corner without losing individuals, groups and communities along the way.

## WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality refers to the ways race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, status and other markers of differences intersect to inform individual realities and lived experiences.

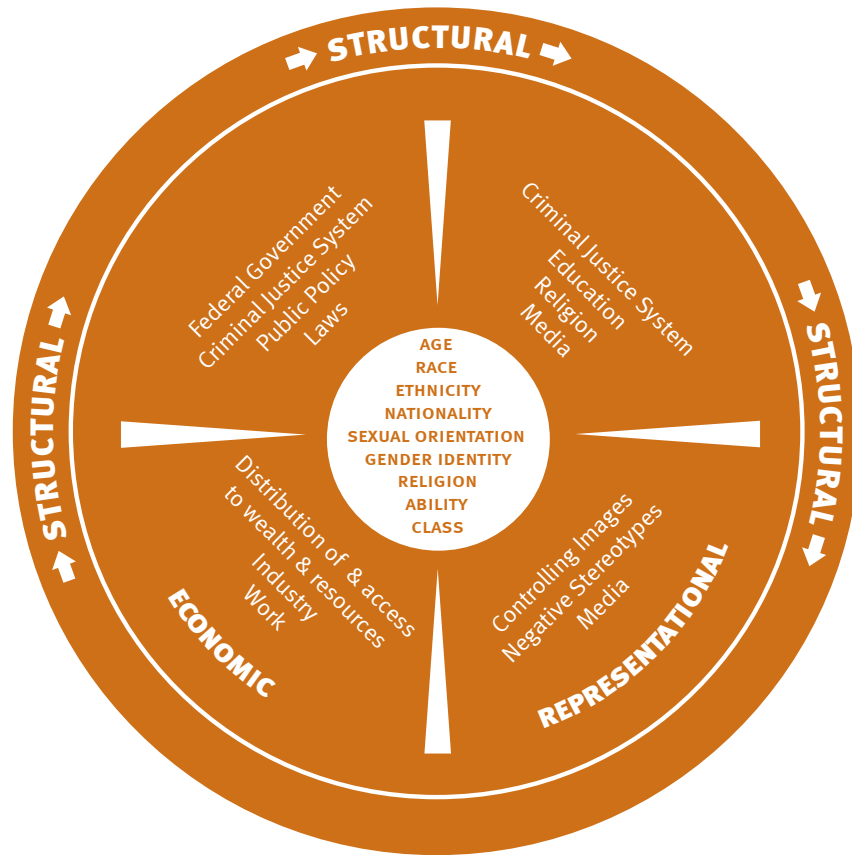
Intersectionality recognizes that individuals and groups are shaped by multiple and intersecting identities. These identities often inform an individual's world view, perspective and relationship to others in society.

An Intersectional perspective or framework encourages policymakers and social change leaders to identify the ways in which race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability and status influence public policy outcomes at the national, state and local levels. This approach can also inform advocacy efforts aimed at increasing equity and equality in society.

## HISTORY OF INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality gained currency in the late 1980s and early 90s when feminists and women of color began to use the term to articulate their experiences in society and within movements for social change and equality. They argued that systems of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other markers of difference were intersecting and interlocking. These markers often interact with institutions and structures in society to limit access to resources and information to privilege some groups over others, and to maintain power. One of the earliest articulations of the intersectional framework is outlined in the groundbreaking article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color* by noted legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw.

## THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH MODEL FOR POLICY & SOCIAL CHANGE



The Intersectional Approach Model for Policy and Social Change was developed to examine issues of social change and equality multi-causally and intersectionally. The Model attempts to explain and generate strategies that are inclusive and get to the root causes of the social problem or issue. It also challenges single-issue organizing agendas, policy frameworks and models by encouraging organizations, policy advocates and community leaders to look broadly at the root causes of discrimination and inequality.

## STARTING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH MODEL FOR POLICY & SOCIAL CHANGE

**WE ALL HAVE POINTS OF PRIVILEGE & POINTS OF OPPRESSION.** Using an intersectional framework, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability and other markers of difference intersect and inform one another. There is no hierarchy of oppression or discrimination. For example, an individual's class or socioeconomic status may impact his or her experience as a woman or person of color with respect to access to resources and information.

**THE GOAL OF THE MODEL IS TO ENSURE THAT ALL GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES HAVE A VOICE IN SOCIAL CHANGE AND POLICY ADVOCACY EFFORTS.** In working to create a socially just world and advance inclusive public policies, it is important that all groups and communities are at the center and forefront of discussions for social and policy change. The Intersectional Approach Model for Policy and Social Change encourages power sharing across differences and communities with an eye toward creating opportunities for those who have been historically disadvantaged to have a seat at the decision-making table.

**SYSTEMS & STRUCTURES OF DISCRIMINATION AND OPPRESSION ARE LINKED. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO CHALLENGE ONE SYSTEM OF DISCRIMINATION WITHOUT CHALLENGING OTHERS.** The Intersectional framework encourages social change leaders and policy advocates to make the links and connections between various forms of discrimination. The systems and structures that maintain racial and ethnic privilege in society are the same systems and structures used to maintain gender, class and heterosexual privilege.

## FORMS OF INTERSECTIONALITY

### STRUCTURAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Structural intersectionality refers to the creation and operation of certain systems and structures in society that maintain privilege for some groups or individuals while restricting the rights and privileges of others. Structural intersectionality encompasses the political, economic, representational and institutional forms of discrimination and domination.

Structural intersectionality highlights the connectedness of systems and structures in society and helps us understand how each system affects or impacts others. Any particular disadvantage or disability is sometimes compounded by another disadvantage reflecting the dynamics of a separate system or structure of subordination.

### POLITICAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Political intersectionality refers to the structures and systems of the laws and policies that govern individuals and groups in societies. It focuses on the impact of laws, the criminal justice system, public policies, and the government in shaping the individual or group's sense of fairness, equality, and justice in society.

Political Intersectionality highlights how laws and public policies are shaped and informed by dominant cultural perspectives of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, ability, and sexuality.

### INSTITUTIONAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Institutional intersectionality focuses on the impact of institutions on the individual and the group. It highlights how institutions present in society restrict, limit or deny access to resources for marginalized groups or individuals.

### ECONOMIC INTERSECTIONALITY

Economic intersectionality pays attention to the distribution of wealth and resources in societies; the individual or group's access to information; and the impact of social class on an individual or group's access to resources, opportunities and mobility.

### REPRESENTATIONAL INTERSECTIONALITY

Representational intersectionality refers to the depiction of individuals and groups in dominant culture and society through media, texts, language, and images. It pays close attention to how both the dominant and marginalized groups are represented in society.

It refers to the way race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnic images in society come together to create unique and specific narratives that shape and inform policies, laws, and institutions.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women affects all segments of our society. Using an Intersectional framework, we can begin to understand how violence against women may impact individuals and communities differently based on their social location and lived experiences.

### STRUCTURAL INTERSECTIONALITY & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Within the context of violence against women, structural intersectionality highlights the difficulties marginalized groups and individuals may face within the criminal-legal system, at social service agencies or when attempting to access resources or information.

### POLITICAL INTERSECTIONALITY & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Within the context of violence against women, political intersectionality highlights the biases in the creation of public policies to address violence against women, gaps in the criminal-legal system, remedies for victims, and penalties for perpetrators of violence.

### INSTITUTIONAL INTERSECTIONALITY & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Within the context of violence against women, institutional intersectionality sheds light on how institutions created to help can become obstacles for marginalized women or groups. It also highlights how systems of privilege and discrimination are maintained.

### ECONOMIC INTERSECTIONALITY & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Within the context of violence against women, economic intersectionality refers to the difficulties women encounter when leaving an abusive relationship or prosecuting a crime with very few resources or access to information.

### REPRESENTATIONAL INTERSECTIONALITY & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Within the context of violence against women, racist, classist or homophobic images lead to the assumption that violence is cultural, gender oppression is normal or acceptable in particular communities, or that violence is acceptable in communities that deviate from the heterosexual norm.



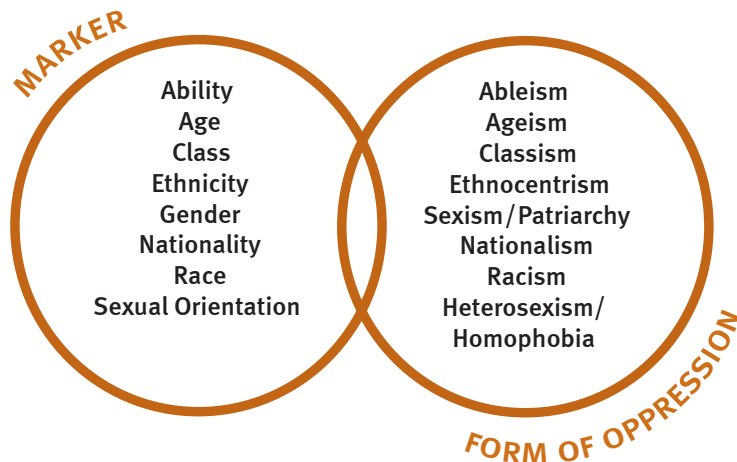
## MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE

A marker of difference is a defining, sometimes evident, characteristic or attribute that distinguishes groups or individuals from one another in society. The meaning and value of these markers are shaped and informed by society. Race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, religion and ability are markers of difference. All individuals and groups are marked in multiple ways, some of which are immediately apparent and some that are not.

### MARKERS OF DIFFERENCE VS. FORMS OF OPPRESSION

Race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other markers of difference are not inherently oppressive or forms of oppression. Forms of oppression and discrimination are racism, classism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, anti-Semitism, or ageism. They are systematic and violent acts of maintaining hierarchies and privilege in society.

For example, simply being Latina in society is not inherently oppressive or bad. As a woman of color, she may find strength and power in her race and gender. The issue is being Latina in a sexist and racist society that privileges a particular race, gender or sexual orientation (i.e., white, male and heterosexual).



## MONO-CAUSAL VS. MULTI-CAUSAL FRAMEWORKS

### MONO-CAUSAL FRAMEWORKS

Historically and in the late part of the twentieth century, individuals, communities and organizations tended to organize around a single identity or group-specific concerns. Social groups identified common interests based on shared experience and formulated political agendas to have their concerns addressed at the local, state or national levels.

Mono-causal frameworks focus on oppression based on one primary marker of difference as the root cause of a social problem or issue. The Civil Rights Movement and the women's movement, organized around race and gender, respectively, are two examples of movements for social change that focused on one primary marker to advance rights and argue for equality in the public sphere.

Strategies employed using a mono-causal framework often ignore the complexity of a social problem or issue by negating other factors that might be contributing to or impacting an individual's or group's ability to obtain rights and equality in society.

### MULTI-CAUSAL FRAMEWORKS

Multi-causal frameworks and approaches recognize that there may be many root causes for a social issue or problem. They also acknowledge that identity is fluid and individuals may share membership in more than one group; and this shared membership impacts how they view and are impacted by a social problem or issue.

Multi-causal frameworks also recognize common targets, strategies and moral justification for action across differences and communities. Multi-causal frameworks appeal to a broader cross-section of the population because issues tend to be framed broadly and in ways that cut across difference.

## MACRO & MICRO LEVELS OF DISCRIMINATION

**THE MACRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION** refers to oppression and discrimination that happens in the larger society. It describes the relationship between individuals or groups and social institutions, systems and structures. Social institutions may include the media, organized religion, the government or educational systems.

### STRUCTURAL MACRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION

The structural macro level of oppression is the way domination is enacted and privilege is maintained through social institutions and structures. It determines the overall organization of society, beliefs and value systems, and dissemination of ideas and knowledge in society. Key social institutions and structures that reinforce or maintain dominant societal norms and values include the media, the education system and organized religion.

Educational, media and religious organizations represent institutions whose primary purpose is ideological—producing and distributing ideas and knowledge about society, why it is organized the way it is and what people need to know in order to function.

### POLITICAL/INSTITUTIONAL MACRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION

The political macro level of oppression refers to the government, laws, the civil and criminal justice system, the police and the military. They represent institutions whose primary purpose is political—creating and enforcing laws and government structures that define citizens' rights, responsibilities and privileges.

Examples:

- Civil and criminal legal systems
- Police
- Military

### REPRESENTATIONAL MACRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION

The representational macro level of oppression refers to the depiction of individuals and groups in society and in the media. Representation may include controlling images and negative stereotypes that are used to maintain oppression, justify inequality and reinforce the superiority of the dominant group or culture.

Examples:

- Portrayals of Latinos as illegal immigrants and lazy workers stealing “American jobs”;
- Stereotypes of African-American women as welfare queens or baby-making machines;
- Images of gays and lesbians as sexually promiscuous; and
- Portrayals of Asian women as passive.

### ECONOMIC MACRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION

Economic macro level refers to industry and work that produce and distribute society's valued goods and services. The economic macro level refers to the distribution of resources, social capital, wealth, and information in societies and communities.

Examples:

- Exploitation of women workers and people of color in the labor market;
- A lesbian is fired because of her sexual orientation; and
- A single woman cannot maintain a job because of lack of daycare for her children.

## » GOOD TO KNOW...

**THE MICRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION** and oppression is often used to describe the connections among people and issues as seen from a personal or individual perspective. It addresses oppression and discrimination at the individual and family levels. Families are institutions where systems of oppression and the dominant ideology are reinforced daily in an intimate environment. On the micro level, families shape individuals and can serve to maintain or perpetuate oppression.

### INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

Internalized oppression is defined as the attitudes and behaviors of some oppressed people that reflect negative, harmful stereotypical beliefs of the dominant group or culture directed at oppressed individuals. Subordinate or oppressed groups may internalize, perpetuate, normalize or adopt these beliefs about themselves. There are two dominant forms of internalized oppression:

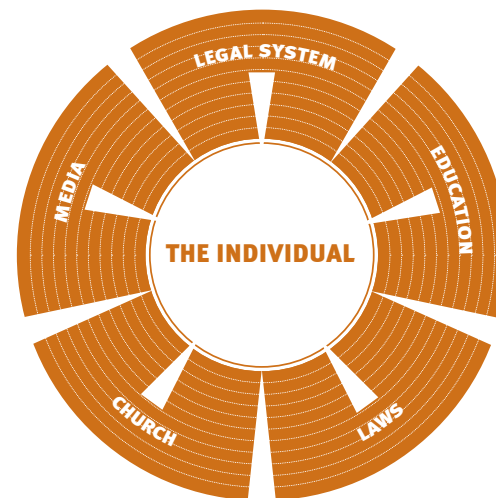
#### SELF-NEGATION

Subordinate group members may restrict their own lives or beliefs based on the assumptions or stereotypes of the dominant group. They may consider themselves inferior to the dominant group. The individual might seek to assimilate or become “acceptable” in the eyes of the dominant group.

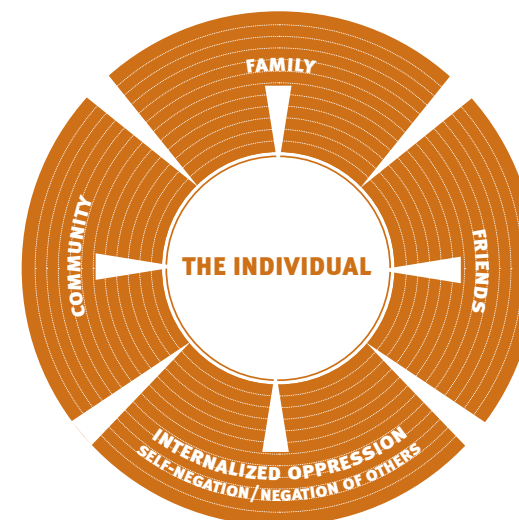
#### NEGATION OF OTHERS

Subordinate group members may restrict the mobility of other members of the group because they may believe that the actions of one member are a reflection of the whole group. Subordinate group members may adopt the negative views of oppressed groups or their own group out of a belief that is rooted in individual or group failings.

## MACRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION



## MICRO LEVEL OF DISCRIMINATION



## **POLICY CHANGE USING THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH MODEL**

### **IDENTIFY THE POLICY OR ADVOCACY ISSUE TO BE ADDRESSED**

In most social change and advocacy organizations, the decision to advocate for inclusive and representative public policies occurs because there is a realization that no matter how many programs are designed to address a social problem without adequate public policies in place to support program efforts, very little progress will be made.

In organizing for policy change, it is important to focus on a specific policy or piece of legislation. The policy issue should be connected to the organization's mission or goals. And because so many issues are layered and complex, once you have identified the policy issue, it is important to further narrow the focus by identifying existing gaps or opportunities for policy intervention.

Be sure to distinguish between a proactive and a defensive policy campaign. A proactive policy campaign focuses on promoting a policy or piece of legislation that will positively benefit your constituency. A defensive policy campaign focuses on blocking or preventing the implementation of a policy that will have an adverse effect on the constituency.

### **GATHER DATA & INFORMATION TO MAKE THE CASE**

When crafting a policy advocacy campaign, it is important to understand how the issue impacts your community or constituency. In order to be effective, you will need to gather data and information to support your case. Data and information may include interviews, testimonies, statistics, articles, and stories from communities and individuals.

In making the case, it is important to articulate why a particular problem exists and the reasons why the current policy or policy under consideration is inadequate to address the problem. If possible, try to come up with policy alternatives or options to make the policy more inclusive or representative of your constituency.

Using an intersectional framework, it will be important to consider how policy alternatives will impact various communities and the ways in which race, class, gender, ethnicity, or class may affect the issue.

### **ASSESS THE POLITICAL CLIMATE & OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVOCACY INTERVENTION**

Public policy is not made in a vacuum. It is affected by a variety of factors that include social and economic conditions, public opinion, cultural norms and what is happening at the federal, state and local level, among other factors. In choosing a policy issue, it is important to know what's happening in the larger society.

### **IDENTIFY PARTNERS & COLLABORATORS**

In terms of winning on a policy campaign, identifying the right partners and collaborators is critical. Key partners and stakeholders should be engaged and involved from the very beginning so that they can have input in how the issue is framed and so that they feel invested in the process. With policy campaigns, it will also be important to engage policymakers, community leaders and elected officials.

### **IDENTIFY WHAT A WIN LOOKS LIKE FOR THE CAMPAIGN OR ISSUE**

Policy change can be a slow-moving process. Try to identify short- and long-term goals. When determining what a win might look like for the organization or campaign, try to be as specific and focused as possible. Goals, objectives and anticipated outcomes should be realistic and in line with the mission and vision of the organization. If possible, try to identify an end goal.

### IDENTIFY STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING GOALS, OBJECTIVES & INTENDED OUTCOMES

Using an intersectional framework, there are multiple strategies that can be employed to win on an issue. When working in coalition and partnership with others, it will be important to respect the skills, talents and experiences individuals and communities are bringing to the table. Further, some strategies will be effective in reaching some constituents more than others. Be open and generate as many strategies for winning on the issue as possible.

### CREATE A DETAILED ACTION PLAN & TIMETABLE

Action plans and timetables should be realistic and reflective of the size and scope of the campaign. They should also take into consideration the resources needed to move on the issue and what is happening in the larger political landscape.

In planning, be sure to delegate responsibilities and tasks to members of the team or coalition. It is important to leave a planning meeting with a plan of action or next steps. If time runs out during a meeting, be sure to circulate the plan along with responsibilities to the group shortly thereafter.

### EXECUTE

Many organizations lose on an issue not because no one cares, but because the execution is slow or disorganized. Once you have identified the problem or issue to be addressed, generated goals and strategies, and created an action plan, following through and managing the campaign are crucial.

## AGENDA SETTING & ISSUE FRAMING

**AGENDA SETTING** is central to the policymaking process. When policymakers begin active discussions about a problem and potential solutions, the issue is said to be on the agenda. If an issue fails to attract an appropriate amount of attention, it does not make the agenda.

In order for an issue to become a part of the national, state or local agenda, it must first be defined as a problem and deemed a priority. Even if an issue gets on the agenda, there is no guarantee there will be policy action on it.

There is stiff competition in terms of what issues actually land on the local, state or federal agendas. Organizations, corporations, lobbyists and other interest groups spend an inordinate amount of resources to influence or to make sure their issue is part of the agenda.

### WHO SETS THE PUBLIC AGENDA?

There is a huge debate about who sets the public agenda or who determines what gets on the national agenda. There is no group or specific entity that determines the public agenda. The agenda is determined by a number of factors and actors. They include:

- The media
- Pollsters (public opinion polls)
- The public
- Politicians, legislators, Congress, the President

### ADDITIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE PUBLIC AGENDA

- What's happening in the larger society
- Political climate
- The Administration
- Current events

## » GOOD TO KNOW...

**ISSUE FRAMING** is critical to winning or losing on a policy issue or advocacy campaign. Framing can affect the acceptance and success of social programs or policy issues by influencing the degree to which the programs or their beneficiaries are stigmatized or supported.

### WHAT IS A FRAME?

Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world.

The idea behind framing is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of different perspectives. Framing itself refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue.

The frame within which an issue is discussed is influential in determining the nature of policy alternatives and the eventual policy outcomes. Framing can also be used to explain policy change by highlighting connections between a particular problem and its solutions.

## SOCIAL CHANGE & ORGANIZING USING THE INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH MODEL

### IDENTIFY THE ISSUE OR PROBLEM TO BE ADDRESSED

It is important to be as specific as possible when identifying the problem or issue to be addressed. If possible, the issue or problem should be connected to the organization's mission or goals. And because so many issues are layered and complex, once you have identified the issue or problem, it is important to further narrow your focus by identifying existing gaps or opportunities for intervention.

### IDENTIFY THE ROOT CAUSE(S) FOR THE PROBLEM OR ISSUE

Using an intersectional framework, it is likely to discover several root causes for an issue or problem. Tackle them by: unpacking and brainstorming the issue and looking at the various communities that may be impacted by it; examining the systems, structures, and institutions involved in maintaining or perpetuating the problem; and considering the ways race, class, gender, ethnicity, or class may be impacting the issue.

### IDENTIFY PARTNERS & COLLABORATORS

In terms of winning on a campaign or issue, identifying the right partners and collaborators is critical. Key partners and stakeholders should be engaged and involved from the very beginning so that they can have input in how the issue is framed and so they feel invested in the process.

When identifying partners, look for obvious and not so obvious allies and collaborators. Using an intersectional and multi-issue framework, an issue such as violence against women can be framed broadly and include issues related to health care, immigration, and the economy. As such, immigrant rights organizations, labor unions, and health care advocates can also sign on to the campaign.

### IDENTIFY WHAT A WIN LOOKS LIKE FOR THE CAMPAIGN OR ISSUE

Policy change can be a slow moving process. Try to identify short- and long-term goals. When determining what a win might look like for the organization or campaign, try to be as specific and focused as possible. Goals, objectives and anticipated outcomes should be realistic and in line with the mission and vision of the organization. If possible, try to identify an end goal.

### IDENTIFY STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING GOALS, OBJECTIVES & INTENDED OUTCOMES

Using an intersectional framework, there are multiple strategies that can be employed to win on an issue. When working in coalition and partnership with others, it will be important to respect the skills, talents and experiences individuals and communities are bringing to the table. Further, some strategies will be effective in reaching some constituents more than others. Be open and generate as many strategies for winning on the issue as possible.

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## WORKING DEFINITIONS

### ABILITY

The quality or state of being able to have or having the power to perform tasks physically, mentally or legally.

### AGE

The time of life at which some particular qualification, power, or capacity arises or rests.

### CLASS

Position in economy with regards to the distribution of wealth and resources, income and poverty, and the distribution of power and authority in the workforce.

### ETHNICITY

Belonging to or deriving from the cultural, racial, religious, language or beliefs of a particular group of people or country.

### GENDER

Culturally and socially constructed relationships between men and women.

### GENDER IDENTITY

How we see ourselves—some of us as women, as men, some as a combination of both, or some as neither.

### NATIONALITY

The quality or membership in a particular nation, whether original or acquired.

### RACE

Ancestry and selected physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture and eye shape.

### SEX

Biological and anatomical characteristics attributed to male and females.

### SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, both genders, neither gender, or another gender. It also refers to a person's sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, behaviors expressing them and membership in a community of others who share them.





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**Inclusion.**