

What is intersectional equality? A definition and goal of equality for organizations

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Abstract

Organizational research has come a long way in understanding and dealing with inequalities in the workplace. Despite this, there has not been enough progress toward equality. The reason for the stymied progress, we argue, is in large part due to the conceptual gaps in our understanding of equality. This has not been clear enough to prevent previous imbalances in power, interests and domination from re-manifesting themselves in new ways. Because organizations are complex, there needs to be a clear definition and goal of equality that can account for these mechanisms. In this article, we present a conceptual approach we call intersectional equality. To develop this approach, we build on Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality and Joan Acker's inequality regimes that are useful for understanding the presence and persistency of inequality in organizations, but these do not define solutions for equality. At this point, we turn to equality and justice theory and examine Amartya Sen's capabilities approach for incorporating organizations and organizational responsibilities to pursue equality. In light of the conceptual gaps in intersectionality, the inequality regimes, and the capabilities approach, we present intersectional equality as a conclusive alternative concept and approach. Intersectional equality sharpens the feminist definition and vision of equality for organizations and provides a practical path forward

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for building coalitions and capabilities across four dimensions of organizational disparities (procedural, discursive, material, and affective).

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1 | THE NECESSITY OF A NEW CONCEPT

Feminist scholarship has made great strides in uncovering, analyzing and understanding inequality. However, amid quantum leaps forward in comprehending inequality, there is a lack of knowledge and consensus for the most appropriate or effective solutions to achieve equality in organizations (Benschop & Verloo, 2011; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018; Pullen et al., 2017). Feminist expertise has not agreed how to proceed and bring about change because while there has been a large body of theory and empirical evidence of how inequality is reproduced, and critical organizational literature points out what needs to be changed, the instruments to combat these inequalities seem to have little effect (Correll, 2017; Henry et al., 2017). Organizations may have collected an array of equality measures and advocacy instruments over the past years, but they face conflicting recommendations and experience in implementing them (Acker, 1990; Romani et al., 2019).

A major stumbling block for the translation of this information on inequality into a concerted effort to achieve equality is the absence of a clear definition of equality. There is an insufficient and incomplete vision of how to define equality in organizations. Organizations are complex and their equality instruments are too often approached in isolation from one another, with no overall end objective (Cockburn, 1989; Nishii et al., 2018). Organizational structures may play a part of the problem if organizational policies do not address gender and diversity issues within a relational context. This conceptual gap in the scholarship of the normative kind is especially worrying in an era where social inequality has worsened (Affairs, 2020; Forum, 2020; OECD, 2019). There is not only a necessity for knowledge and learning about inequality and injustice; but there is also a “change in perspective” or a set of equality principles to propel effective change which needs to be visualized and discussed in order to provide a path forward (Verloo, 2013). We need a definition of equality that is general enough to apply to organizations in their variety but specific enough for each organization to interpret and apply the definition in a concrete way. This article and its definition of equality address such a gap in the literature and will help to align organizational policy and instruments for positive change.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate a definition of equality that is firmly anchored in feminist, critical organizational, and justice literature. We present such a concept we call *intersectional equality* in three steps building on three corresponding bodies of thought. First, we outline intersectionality, based on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), and also on the authors in this field before and after her, in describing this phenomenon (Collins, 1990; Hancock, 2007). We outline how intersectionality has been applied to organizations and how it could be expanded in its theoretical application. It is our intention here to illustrate intersectionality's ability to capture the inequality we need to address, namely, issues of power. We then proceed to define intersectional equality. Following this, we discuss the contributions and limitations of Joan Acker's theory of inequality regimes (2006) for conceptualizing equality and inequality. We develop intersectional equality's theoretical framework of four dimensions of disparities that is better placed to locate processes of power and change in organizations. Amartya Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1980, 1992, 1999) is the third body of thought we draw on for its philosophical method and definition of equality. Steeped in justice literature, this approach has potential, we argue, to further clarify the meaning of equality for organizations, although its application can only be utilized together with a feminist critical analysis, as we illustrate in the text. In conclusion, we summarize intersectional equality and explore its application further. Intersectional equality is important for theorists and practitioners because it fills a conceptual gap and breaks through the present impasse of an incomplete

equality vision. We use the term “equality” instead of equity because it pays tribute to (and builds on) the long tradition of social justice discourse that precedes it. Intersectional equality does not claim to be a theory of social justice, but it is a vision of achieving equality in organizations that must operate in unequal societies. Feminist activists, practitioners and policy-makers can use the concept to develop strategies for implementing and evaluating equality instruments and can apply it to an agenda for social change. The paper also speaks to a broad audience interested in participating in a conversation about normative theories of equality and feminist approaches to social justice.

2 | INTERSECTIONALITY AS A FORM OF INEQUALITY

Intersectionality is the frame of reference for *inequality* and our starting point for the definition of intersectional equality. We would like to point out perhaps an obvious premise: inequality and equality are two distinct concepts, but they are interrelated. The conceptual clarification of inequality provides the basis from which to explore its solutions. Since Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, it has been possible for feminist thought to shift the perspective on gender, race, class, and other social locations from static predefined groupings to the unequal power dynamics that these social categories represent. Intersectionality offers significant insight into a form of inequality that philosophical approaches to justice and equality have not been able to previously encompass (Spelman, 1988) and so the concept provides a new opportunity to define equality. In the following section we explain intersectionality’s focus and parameters of *inequality* that will shape the starting point for a focused and effectively designed feminist solution of *equality*.

With the concept of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw put a name to the conversation around inequality that women of color had been having for a long time in the US. As has been illustrated in historical examples from the Combahee River Collective (1981 [1977]), Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]), bell hooks (2015 [1984]) and many others (Collins, 2011). Crenshaw explains that their experience of oppression cannot be categorized solely by gender or race or even a sum of these categories (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). She argues that inequality can be understood very much like a traffic accident at a road intersection, for example, when thinking about inequality in employment. Here, both the roads (race and gender structures in the workforce) and the traffic (such as hiring or other policies) come together, so it is hard to locate just one “cause” for an accident. Intersectionality expresses the complex mix of factors in inequality, both focusing our attention on issues around race, gender, language proficiency, citizenship status, among others, but also on the context and structures that shape their incurring privilege and disadvantage. Such a phenomenon has been described by other black and brown feminists in various terms, for example, as interlocking systems of oppression (Collective, 1981 [1977]), multiple jeopardy (King, 1988), simultaneity (Holvino, 2010) or a matrix of domination (Collins, 1990).

Proponents of intersectionality theory assert that there are never distinct and single factors that create privilege or oppression but social categories shift in their meaning, depending on social context, relationships and interactions of individuals with one another. Intersectionality is an ongoing, dynamic process, so that Crenshaw and co-authors argue that social categories be conceived “not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power – (emphasizing) what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 786). Intersectionality describes the social power dynamics in situations where individuals might have privilege in some situations but are oppressed in others (Collins, 2015; Hancock, 2007; Holvino, 2010). For this reason, individuals who might belong to one social category cannot be considered equal to one another in all (other) respects. Individuals will not experience inequality in the exact same way because each individual has a unique intersection of social locations (e.g., of race, class, gender, sexuality, physical and mental ability).

For the purpose of our definition of intersectional equality, we stick closely to Crenshaw’s writings and we are careful to distinguish her definition of intersectionality from the way in which some authors have interpreted intersectionality in terms of “identity politics” (Nash, 2008; Zack, 2005). Crenshaw’s approach does not define intersectionality as an accumulation of categories/identities. Nor is her intersectionality in the spirit of essentialism, in the

sense that a universality of experience is related to group attributes. Instead, Crenshaw's intersectionality is a form of inequality that occurs "at a crossroads" and a "doing of inequality" cannot be isolated or contained from the context of its surrounding power hierarchies and their historically contingent and variable ways.

An example of Crenshaw's illustrates this approach. Many factors come together to shape the inequality that Emma DeGraffenreid faces in her anti-discrimination lawsuit against a car manufacturing company (Crenshaw, 2016). The company does not discriminate against African-American men (who are working in industrial maintenance jobs) or against white women (who are employed in secretarial and front office work). The US courts, however, are unable to broaden their framework to include Emma DeGraffenreid's situation, throwing out her case on the basis that she is seeking preferential treatment by claiming both gender and race discrimination. Such consequences of the court case illustrate the intersectionality that Emma DeGraffenreid faces. As many factors come together, not only does she have the material necessity and loss of employment possibilities but she bears an emotional toll of experiencing her situation as legally inconsequential, rendering her powerless and without legal instruments to overcome this inequality.

Intersectionality's approach to inequality is promising for our approach, but there are also limitations to its analytical framework. For example, if various forces at a crossroads are responsible for the inequality that a person experiences, then the concept gives us no bounded factors that might be at work. We will need to be satisfied that we may not be able to count all factors. Furthermore, it may be difficult to identify the power dynamics at play and it may be difficult to grasp how meanings of social categories shift in these power hierarchies. Finally, it may be hard to resist the urge to count accumulating characteristics of social location and so we might erroneously slip down an identity politics slope of analysis. With these limitations in mind, we turn to organizational approaches around intersectionality in order to make our case for intersectional equality.

3 | INTERSECTIONALITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES

So far, organizations have been slow to adopt intersectionality as a way to think about inequalities at work (Holvino, 2010; Nkomo et al., 2019) and organizational researchers have yet to expand and deepen their analyses of power dynamics in organizations by using an intersectional approach (Rodríguez et al., 2016). As of yet, there is no consensus on how to incorporate intersectionality (Healy et al., 2018; Rodríguez et al., 2016), and the literature has mainly concentrated on analyses of intersectional perspectives and experiences (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Garcia-Lopez, 2008; Köllen, 2014; Schnabel, 2016). For example, intersectionality is used to illustrate differing vantage points and their influence on the visibility and legitimacy of organizational inequalities (Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). Intersectionality has been adopted to show how organizations and policies tackle multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination (Bose, 2012; Hankivsky, 2014) or how organizations differ in their interpretation of (similar) clients' needs and issues (Lépinard, 2014). One study from Zakiya Luna (2016) on intersectionality in a women of color's advocacy organization explores the power dynamics among its members when organizational members struggle to promote collective identity without negating internal member differences. Luna notes that discussions in this organization on the strategies used to address intersectional power differences occurred more often behind closed doors and she concludes that continuous, structured and open dialog on intersectionality and its power dynamics could be an effective path for the organization to achieve its goals.

Intersectionality is useful for exploring the power dynamics within organizations and not limiting inequality to fixed social categories of social identity or location per se. The particular power dynamics that are specific to intersectionality in Luna's study encompass the differences in hierarchical levels of the organization as well as the dynamics of privilege and disadvantage rooted in organizational members' identities (Luna, 2016). These power dynamics unfold furthermore in what confers as disadvantage in one situation but privilege in another. For example, managers can be disadvantaged as women of color, but as decision-makers within the organization they also hold privilege. The meanings of social categories continuously change (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018) and by adopting an intersectional perspective to understand inequality, organizations may more consciously adjust their policy according to the power dynamics

that ensue. This may help instruct organizations' adaptation to inequality's changing character and its multiple re-occurring forms (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012b) as well as how it resurfaces across time and space (Flax, 1987).

Intersectionality's definition and focus on power dynamics as the basis for inequality can change the conversation of two approaches to diversity and equality that have dominated current organizational thought. The first approach, equal opportunities, grew out of public pressure and the US civil rights movements of the 1960s, that then spread to other countries. The equal opportunities approach evolved as ensuing laws and discrimination lawsuits forced organizations to adopt affirmative action policy and quotas for race and gender (Greene & Kirton, 2002; Kirton & Greene, 2015; Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2009). Social categories became important identifiers to track and illustrate widespread discrimination and to create directed instruments to support and empower vulnerable groups. Much of the conversation from the equal opportunities approach has been based on personnel statistics, demanding improved hiring and promotion practices for targeted groups (Kirton & Greene, 2015).

While the equal opportunities approach in organizations is equipped to deal with conflict-laden legal struggles, it has, however, been undermined with an onslaught of ideological challenges that have weakened its clout (van den Brink & Benschop, 2012a). For example, workers who benefit from quotas may find themselves working in hostile working environments where their qualifications and skills are devalued (van den Brink & Stobbe, 2014). Critics of the equal opportunities approach often associate such organizational instruments as forms of *equality of outcomes* and juxtapose this with the idea of individual merit. Postfeminist claims have it that equal opportunity strategies are passé, at the least (Lewis et al., 2019; Verloo, 2018). On the other hand, critical scholars note several issues. First, "one size does not fit all" and policy should differentiate how discrimination is generated and experienced due to race, gender, class, sexuality and other social categories (Verloo, 2006). Secondly, individuals might be the focus for "fixing" the problem with quotas, whereas overall structural change is needed (Benschop & Verloo, 2011). Furthermore, equal opportunity instruments may fail individuals with multiple disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1989). With this and other assessments, an equal opportunity approach has been difficult to sustain and justify on its own, so it is often combined with a second approach, diversity management (Cornelius et al., 2000; Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2009).

Diversity management began two decades after the equal opportunities approach and its conversation has since dominated organizational approaches to diversity and equality. Diversity management steers discourse away from what could be perceived as a "punitive" equal opportunities approach, and instead, highlights organizational voluntarism. Here, organizations can be seen to actively embrace difference and multiculturalism as critical resources that help achieve competitive advantage (Carnevale & Stone, 1994; Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013). Heterogeneity is a goal that organizations strive for, based on two assumptions. First, organizations must ready themselves for future globalization developments and the inevitable diversification of workers and clients (Janssens & Brett, 2006). Secondly, the promotion of employee diversity makes good business sense and will most likely improve organizational resilience, corporate image/identity, and profitability (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Kossek et al., 2006; Tomlinson & Schwabenland, 2009). Diversity management defines inequality as a problem of exclusion, where organizations should willingly work to recruit and integrate diverse members to improve performance (Pringle & Strachan, 2015).

The diversity management approach has had its own fair share of critique, if mainly because of its argumentation and justifications (Ahmed, 2012; Mills & Prasad, 1997; Zanoni et al., 2010). While diversity management has usually been combined with the equality opportunities approach and has a diverse set of instruments created in the spirit of voluntarism, such as diversity networks, mentoring, or anti-bias training, underlying issues remain. Critics of diversity management state that the approach places too little emphasis on equality, which can have negative ramifications for its application (Oswick & Noon, 2014). For example, organizations applying a diversity management approach might be motivated to procure a diverse workforce, but still not change underlying unequal practices at the organization (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). At least theoretically, organizations might exploit workers and reinforce discrimination, even if organizations are voluntarily "including" them in the employee pool (Dobusch, 2017; Pullen et al., 2017). The diversity management argument appeals directly to organizations' concerns about their economic bottom lines, but these justifications too easily overlook inequality.

With intersectionality, intersectional equality offers an alternative approach. Unlike the equal opportunity and the diversity management approaches, intersectional equality's approach shifts the organizational focus directly on organizations' constructions of relationships and power dynamics across categories. Intersectional equality makes a discussion about power dynamics and the actual "doing" and processes of inequality unavoidable. As such, a relational or power-centered understanding of equality has emerged in recent literature, as well. Janssens and Zanoni, for example, state that successful organizational equality practices value multiple knowledge, skills and competencies of their personnel and also allow them to express their multifaceted identities (Janssens & Zanoni, 2014). Likewise, Shore and coauthors present organizational success in equality practices that promote members' feelings of both "belongingness" and "uniqueness" (Shore et al., 2011). In line with these approaches, intersectional equality goes beyond simple inclusion, but directs our focus on domination and subordination. In this vein, for example, Janssen and Brett suggest the metaphor of a fusion kitchen for international team collaboration as a model for neutralizing power differences (Janssens & Brett, 2006). Syed and Özbilgin present an analytical relational framework to better account for power disparities and discrimination (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). These approaches are valuable contributions that address some essential problems of inequality according to intersectionality, and yet they still do not provide the definition and strategy for equality that intersectional equality can provide.

4 | INTERSECTIONAL EQUALITY AND COALITION-BUILDING

If inequality is the discrimination and marginalization that occurs as result of intersecting power dynamics borne from multiple forms of diversity, Crenshaw and scholars of intersectionality offer ways to contend with this inequality (Carastathis, 2013; Cho et al., 2013). For example, Cho et al. (2013) suggest collaboration across different disciplines in the development of an intersectional methodology and theory, and Carastathis (2013) and Cole (2008) promote the idea of coalition-building. Building on Crenshaw's idea that identity groups are "in fact coalitions or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed" (1991, p. 1299), the authors advocate coalition-building as way to understand and address power imbalances that arise in conjunction with intersectionality. In order to bulwark against this form of inequality, individuals identify their own and others' intersecting social locations through coalition-building and personal communication. Individuals can then become aware of the fluidity of their own and others' social locations at any one time and become more conscious of the resulting power relations. Coalitions are a conscious effort to build solidarity with others across locations and to pull resources together in order to benefit from new-found opportunities with these connections (Carastathis, 2013; Cho et al., 2013; Cole, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991).

These authors do not address organizations per se, but we argue there are several advantages to developing a perspective of coalition-building for organizational change efforts toward equality. First of all, coalition-building as a concept has had a long tradition in social and civil rights movements (Cole, 2008; Phelan, 1989) as it incorporates collective action to address inequality (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019; Pullen et al., 2019). Organizational literature on networking might be helpful in this respect (Castilla, 2005; Dennissen et al., 2018). Coalition-building is about the negotiation of interests and power, so that the facilitation of coalitions across intersectional differences could redistribute burdens. For example, Adia Harvey Wingfield (2019) notes that minorities who are underrepresented in some professions take on extremely heavy burdens of work and responsibility to change their institutions. If institutions already supported coalitions, we argue, then employees might be able to connect and listen to one another more easily in order to share these burdens. The concept of coalition-building also encapsulates individual and organizational influences on one another. For example, Celeste Watkins-Hayes (2019) outlines how black women HIV/AIDS activists and advocates integrate their agency across environmental networks, institutions, and public policies, as they transform themselves and actively change their communities.

While such approaches tend to concentrate on coalition-building at local and context-specific sites, the examination of coalition-building in organizations would need to be developed and contextualized. For example, complex organizational structures may produce coalitions that involve different degrees of intensity in personal relationships on

local, national, and international levels. And yet, coalition-building across intersectional differences may offer a way to conceptualize how an organization can listen to different voices of their members and still act in concert to these voices. An organization could then be evaluated for its success, in terms of how it facilitates listening across levels, how it remains open to creating opportunities for different perspectives to evolve and change over time, and how it adapts as new/different social locations emerge and how these are influenced by other perspectives.

With intersectionality as a primary basis for our understanding of inequality, we turn now to define intersectional equality. *Intersectional equality* is an organizational goal and framework for equality, which helps guide and direct decisions to promote equality in organizations. With intersectional equality, organizations reflect on and change the reinforcement of social inequalities that occur in day-to-day social processes, as is described by intersectionality. Organizations continually evaluate and implement changes in their organization based on four dimensions [procedural, discursive, material, and affective], so that particular employees are not over proportionally burdened in these four dimensions. This goal also entails coalition- and community-building indicators that facilitate the listening of employees across organizational levels, an openness for creating opportunities for different perspectives to evolve and change over time, and adaptations as new/different social locations emerge.

Organizations provide the context and environment for individuals to cultivate capabilities and support coalition-building across varied social locations. Ideally, individuals' connections with one another help them recognize and appreciate the intersections of their own social location and understand others' intersections. They learn from one another in terms of skills, ideas, values, and future aspirations. This, in turn, effects the development of their capabilities. By supporting coalitions, organizations can play an integral role in influencing the pursuit and development of capabilities.

Organizations achieve intersectional equality by promoting workers' interaction with one another so that advantages and disadvantages are evenly distributed among individuals in four dimensions: procedural, discursive, material and affective. The procedural dimension in organizations encompasses formal and informal structures of decision-making. Here organizations find ways to incorporate a wider share of individuals' input and involvement across different intersections of social locations. Within the discursive dimension, organizations focus on opening channels of communication to construct norms and discourse on how work needs to be done. In the material dimension organizations find ways to strengthen coalitions and dismantle disparities in the areas of job security, benefits, pay, and promotions. Within the affective dimension, organizations account for emotional aspects of work, such as respect, fear, joy, pleasures, or anger, and devise ways in which these can be constructively distributed. Intersectional equality promotes the integration and sharing of privilege in each dimension, and rejects the distribution of the "greatest reward" to the "least" socially disadvantaged. In order to balance these power inequalities, organizations work to build cohesion and coalitions across social locations and organizational levels in each dimension. In the next section we turn to Joan Acker's inequality regime approach to discuss these issues further.

5 | INEQUALITY REGIMES' FRAMEWORK

Intersectional equality is not only predicated on intersectionality, but this approach is also deeply rooted in Joan Acker's (2006) inequality regimes. The inequality regimes theory has been an extremely influential approach for examining inequality in organizations (Benschop & van den Brink, 2017; Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). The inequality regimes' analytical approach is an essential building block for intersectional equality for its theoretical standpoint that organizations are dynamic and power-laden processes. While we are certainly indebted to Acker for her theoretical insights into organizational measures of effectiveness and capitalist constraints on organizational equality, we do not find that inequality regimes has accurately operationalized intersectionality nor do we find the inequality regimes' "areas of disparities" as helpful as they could be. These conceptual and analytic gaps hinder the inequality regimes from progressing into an analytical framework of providing an equality solution. Therefore, while we build on the premise of inequality regimes, we argue that intersectional equality offers a unique equality solution.

What are inequality regimes? The inequality regimes approach posits that organizations are highly influential in (re)producing inequality. Inequality regimes are defined as “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (2006, p. 443). According to the inequality regime approach, organizations set the “rules of the game” for social interaction and are themselves dynamic processes wherein inequality and equality are negotiated. The term “regime” emphasizes the “doing” of inequality as it occurs in day-to-day organizational processes and practices. While inequality regimes might vary, Acker finds that they always produce ingrained and systematic inequalities among social groups. She posits that change toward greater equality is possible for organizations in capitalist systems but difficult. Entrenched interests and allegiances due to identity and combined advantages may evoke virulent opposition, and with increased globalization, employers tend to down-size and outsource to reduce labor costs. On the other hand, globalization may present a higher visibility of inequality and thereby produce a decrease in inequality's legitimacy (Acker, 2004, 2006).

Acker addresses intersectionality in the inequality regimes theory but chooses to interpret intersectionality as disparities due to particular social locations, concentrating on race, gender, and class (Acker, 2006). Indeed, the inequality regimes approach cites only a handful of studies that deal with intersections of race, class, and gender. Such an approach misses the opportunity to address the dynamic processes of power and privilege as they are played out in intersections of social locations within organizational practices, processes, actions, and meanings. A closer examination of intersectionality would in fact help to better illustrate some of Acker's findings, because intersectionality directs our attention to the microcosms of unequal power processes and might explain their invisibility. For example, a white man of lower class status might hide or downplay his class identity and amplify his maleness and whiteness, if the overall rewards are more advantageous to him (Acker, 2006; Boogaard & Roggeband, 2010). This behavior may continuously connect him to privileged superiors and discourage connections to others. Such interplay of privilege discourages an exchange of experiences across different social locations and so renders inequalities invisible for power holders with little contact to others (Alfrey & Twine, 2017; Tatli & Özbilgin, 2012). It also leaves others outside of these circles to be cynical or fear retaliation about speaking out. Furthermore, Acker notes that change toward equality depends on the visibility of inequality as well as its illegitimacy Acker (2006, p. 454) and so, we assume that with no intervention, inequality reproduces itself.

Intersectionality's definition of inequality may help to locate such problems and call for specific organizational responses to solve them. In terms of mentoring, for example, organizations may ask themselves how their institutions facilitate coalitions like “the old boys network” to the detriment of other coalitions across members' social locations. Equality instruments might focus directly on communication, deliberation, and decision-making processes (Mendelberg et al., 2014; Raelin, 2012). For example, hiring and promotions would account for intersectionality by addressing double standards in evaluations or differing assessments of “potential” for candidates (Herschberg et al., 2018). Furthermore, organizations might design institutional settings to raise the issue of subtle discrimination (van Laer & Janssens, 2011) or to ensure voice and equal power sharing by improving safe ways to broach experiences or honest feedback into on-going organizational processes and instruments. This might come in the form of meeting spaces designed to encourage social exchange, institutionalizing open dialog, and communication about social location. This is not an exhaustive list, but meant to elaborate how intersectionality's definition of inequality generates a specific response and focus.

Intersectionality's definition of inequality also calls for a shift away from the inequality regimes approach in terms of the identification and location of disparities in organizations. According to Acker, there are seven areas in organizations where disparities in gender, race, and class can be found: (1) power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes, (2) workplace decisions such as how to organize work, (3) opportunities for promotion and interesting work, (4) security in employment and benefits, (5) pay and other monetary rewards, (6) respect, and (7) pleasures in work and work relations (2006, p. 443). This differentiation has been highly influential for organizational scholars because it locates and predicts inequality across social groups in organizations (Healy et al., 2018). These locations, however, are not entirely useful for finding and comparing intersectionality's inequality. For example, some areas are not comparable: Acker's first area of “power and control over goals, resources and outcomes” is infused into the other six areas

of disparities. Emotions, such as “respect” or “pleasure at work,” are hard to compare to the same extent with an area such as “pay” or “benefits.” We find it useful, therefore, to rework the idea of organizational areas of disparities into a comparative analysis of dimensions that can serve as a basis for evaluations or indicators of inequality.

In light of this, intersectional equality suggests a re-conceptualization of inequality regimes' disparity areas into comparative dimensions: procedural, discursive, material, and affective. The first, procedural, dimension designates formal and informal structures and rules of an organization. This dimension includes Acker's first area, for example, in terms of how decisions are made on issues such as organizational goals, resources and outcomes, but emphasizes their methods and frameworks. A second dimension, the discursive space, incorporates the norms and understanding, for example, of how work gets done and the aims and potential of work, workers, and the organization. A third, material, dimension includes material outcomes and concrete things that individuals and organizations negotiate. This dimension includes Acker's areas such as pay and monetary rewards, security in employment and benefits, the actual promotions, and the types of work that people do. The final fourth dimension, the affective space, not only includes Acker's areas of respect and pleasures at work but includes all potential emotions and feelings. This affective area may account for “fear” or “anger,” for example, found around sexual harassment at the workplace, or workers' feelings of pressure in organizational down-sizing.

We propose that an equality measure be examined on procedural, discursive, material, and affective dimensions for its progress toward intersectional equality. These dimensions are not the same as Acker's areas of inequality because the use of dimensions may encompass different angles perhaps of only one of Acker's areas of inequality. This can be illustrated with the example of part-time work, as Acker notes that part-time work as an equality measure might disadvantage women if an organization simultaneously demands long hours of work (Acker, 2006, pp. 448, 458; Mescher, 2011; Woods, 2012). Her critique of this policy is best illustrated when analyzed with the four dimensions: (1) If a part-time work option is added where it was missing before, then a procedural dimension may be improved for parents and those performing long-term care. Organizational policy formally gives carers a choice in working part-time. (2) However, the discursive dimension around expectations in work performance would need to be adjusted so not to disadvantage workers who take this option (i.e., delegate them to a “mommy track”). (3) Furthermore, there are consequences at the material dimension in terms of promotions, pay, and benefits. (4) Finally, the affective dimension of this policy would need to be considered, because if working conditions worsen, part-time work could generate negative emotions for those who opt for this policy. Alternatively, such emotions might arise in other workers who feel they are unfairly burdened by those choosing to take this option. With such an approach, the four dimensions provide a useful way to locate and identify the possible progress or hurdles for intersectional equality.

In sum, intersectional equality has gained a substantial foundation from the inequality regimes theory. Acker emphasizes that organizations are processes that actively reproduce power and privilege, which is intersectional equality's quintessential framework. Intersectional equality, however, carefully points to the power processes that are specific to individuals' intersections of social location. Intersectional equality furthermore suggests a grid of four dimensions to help identify and assess the effectiveness of equality measures. In the next section, we illustrate how the capabilities approach contributes a third foundational body of thought that inspires the definition of intersectional equality.

6 | CAPABILITIES WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach provides a third foundation to intersectional equality's definition of equality. The capabilities approach is an approach to equality (Sen, 1980, 1992, 1999) developed out of a critique of utilitarianism and the liberal philosophical tradition of John Rawls' *Justice as Fairness* (1971). A major building block that the capabilities approach offers to intersectional equality is its interpretation of *what* equality is for individuals in organizations. Equality, according to the capabilities approach, is an individual's freedom to achieve capabilities, that is the real opportunities to do and to be what an individual has reason to value. Sen posits that all individuals are bound to need

and want different things for their well-being and development, and they will uniquely process the opportunities that they receive (Sen, 1980). The capabilities approach has been applied to practical pursuits of equality across disciplines (Arndt & Volkert, 2011; Bernardi, 2019; Greco et al., 2018; Nicholls, 2010; Robeyns, 2006; The 2020 Human Development Report, 2020) but has only been sparingly applied to organizational contexts.

Applications of the capabilities approach have been, up until now, varied and investigative in organizational literature (Nielsen, 2016; Sharma, 2016). For the most part, the capabilities approach has been held up as a normative and ethical standard for organizations to enable members to develop capabilities to their full potential (Bertland, 2009; Enderle, 2013). Likewise, the literature has focused on the capabilities approach to illustrate differing individual values. For example, men and women might desire and value different objectives when it comes to developing their capabilities at work (Cornelius & Skinner, 2008). The authors Gagnon and Cornelius, with co-authors, have probed most extensively into the capabilities approach for analyzing organizations (Cornelius & Skinner, 2008; Gagnon & Cornelius, 2006). One application of the capabilities approach they suggest is the inclusion of women's and minorities' perspectives in shaping organizational policy around equality. By listening closely, organizations may thereby develop equality measures that directly incorporate members' values and preferences (Gagnon & Cornelius, 2006). Another method they suggest for applying the capabilities approach is to examine community-building and organizational contributions to surrounding communities (Cornelius & Wallace, 2013). The authors note, however, that further conceptual development and empirical research is needed to understand how to best apply the capabilities approach to organizations (Gagnon & Cornelius, 2006, p. 86). These authors' recommendations for listening and community-building recall the solutions from Cho et al. (2013) to counter inequality in intersectionality. In this case we see parallels of listening and coalition-building in both streams of thought that come together in the concept of intersectional equality.

Any new definition of equality will need to wrestle with the equality definitions and traditions of the past. Intersectional equality pays tribute to the capabilities approach here, but we also find it necessary to critique and differentiate our position. The capabilities approach describes how individuals have the real opportunities to do and to be what they have reason to value. Amartya Sen has refuted some feminists' and others' critique that the capabilities approach is individualistic or focuses on individuals independent from the context of their environment. Sen emphasizes that he has not provided a justice theory but a definition of equality, and only an individual can ultimately be the judge of this equality. Context matters, but only in so far that it relates directly to individuals' capabilities. However, we argue that the division between equality and justice in the capabilities approach is highly problematic because we see equality as contingent on its intersectionality context. The ability to achieve capabilities is connected to the relationships and power dynamics that individuals experience with one another. Therefore, individual equality cannot be completely independent of context and justice. In this respect, the capabilities approach does not go far enough for determining equality in an organization nor do we have an understanding of the reproduction of inequalities that Acker has documented so well. Intersectional equality, instead, emphasizes that organizations and leaders in organizations play an integral role in supporting individuals' capacity to act and to make decisions for themselves and for the greater collective good. Indeed, organizational goals are intertwined with the development of their workers' capabilities, and equality has very much to do with systems that privilege a few workers' capabilities at the cost of others'. We argue that there is a direct link between justice and equality, both in how capabilities are developed and in how a system can link capabilities as trade-offs and reinforce power hierarchies.

Intersectional equality also differs from the capabilities approach because of its dynamic understanding of capability development. The works of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum tend to separate opportunities from procedures (Robeyns, 2005, p. 110). This means that the capabilities approach understands that processes of justice (i.e., rules or laws) are distinct from equality outcomes (i.e., the capabilities). The capabilities approach includes groups and social structures only in so far as they enable and can maintain individual capabilities (D'Amato, 2020, pp. 106–110), with some exceptions (Ibrahim, 2006; Stewart, 2005). The capabilities approach seems to define capabilities in a somewhat snapshot fashion that relegates individual equality to a certain time and space, with less attention to processes. The processes in oppressive power dynamics, however, have important long term effects. For example, the components of feelings of powerlessness and inconsequence can (ironically) shape individuals' understanding of choices and options

in the future. Acker's understanding of organizational processes, on the other hand, gives us analytical leeway to reflect on the development and factors of individual capabilities over time.

Intersectional equality's dynamic approach to exploring capabilities over time is beneficial because we can begin to understand how preferences for certain capabilities develop. For example, Sen finds in a study that rural Indian women's preferences and aspirations are set lower than men's and he attributes this to internalized social expectations and restrictions (Sen, 1987). He states that women's choices to negotiate for their own well-being within the family may be constrained by the necessity of cooperation and their socialization to expect less (Sen, 1987, 1999, Sen et al., 2003). Sen makes a distinction between choices that these women pursue based on what they are conditioned to want and expect, in contrast to other choices that could better improve their well-being. Sen's conclusion coincides with wide-spread work on "adaptive preferences" about choices that are made within the confines of societal constraints (Khader, 2011; Schleutker, 2017). As feminists have argued in the past, socialization will often reproduce inequalities (Risman, 2004), so it is essential to account for socialization (and preference- and value-building) in a definition of equality (England, 2011). Otherwise, an equality approach becomes illusive if it does not break a cycle of individuals' continuously valuing choices that are sub-optimal for their well-being, or when beneficiaries see no value in giving up privilege. By identifying these issues as part of the inequality problem itself, intersectional equality makes room for ending this cycle.

Intersectional equality envisions a dynamic process of individuals' equality within an organizational context. The freedom of individuals to develop capabilities is assumed to be bounded by organizational frameworks and organizational contexts. These shape individuals' interaction with one another to influence capabilities as well as help shape how individuals perceive one another and develop their values and preferences. In this sense, intersectional equality extends beyond the capabilities approach and integrates a framework of "socialization" and "identity" that transpires within an organizational context. Such a framework illustrates that individuals develop their values within social contexts that may prompt value alignment or dissonance, and so support individuals' approach to developing their agency and acting on these values. Identity, too, is experienced as a relative, circumstantial condition of context in organizations.

The relational perspective of intersectional equality benefits our understanding, too, of advocating equality within a context of unequal societies. For example, organizations will need to navigate different types of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001) and they have different bases from which to develop intersectional equality because they vary in the degree to which they mirror societal inequalities, the type of organization they entail, and in which work sector they are located. Organizational means for achieving intersectional equality will depend on particular practices, internal work processes, and actions and meanings around organizational operations and targets. Intersectional equality is therefore meant to present a vision of equality that can be implemented with a process of reflexivity (Lombardo et al., 2009), across different types of organizations in different sectors. Reflexivity rejects outsourcing of work at inferior conditions while maintaining intersectional equality within an elite inner circle. Nor does an organization achieve intersectional equality if it demolishes surrounding communities and neighborhoods: in these cases, coalitions across intersections of social location have not been attained. Unlike the capabilities approach, intersectional equality enables us to conceptualize and tag the contradictory factors that may emerge in a process toward equality because it illuminates relationships and possible shifts in unequal power dynamics.

7 | CONCLUSION

With intersectional equality it was our intention to provide feminist reflection and analysis of what constitutes equality in organizations and how organizations might more effectively implement gender and diversity policies so that progress is not elusive. Feminist theorizing shows how issues of power and the actual "doing" of inequality have not been successfully integrated into organizational approaches for gender and diversity (Benschop, 2021). Therefore, our conceptual approach of intersectional equality that focuses on issues of power, front and center, promises to help prevent

power from being used to covertly side-line equality efforts. In sum, intersectional equality emphasizes the “doing” of equality. We argue for an organizational praxis that combines reflection and action: through Acker's (2006) analytical approach we developed into four dimensions, along with action in the form of coalition- and community-building (as suggested by Cho et al., 2013, Cornelius & Wallace, 2013, and Gagnon & Cornelius, 2006) and the support of people's capacity to make meaningful choices in developing their capabilities (Sen, 1980). We see these three aspects as essential in achieving and maintaining equitable structures, relationships and processes in organizations.

Intersectional equality is a different frame of reference, so shifting to this perspective presents a challenge but it is not impossible. It may be a challenge for organizations to unpack power dynamics and strive for change. Organizational leaders may find it challenging to take on the responsibility for changing the status quo, they may even have an interest in maintaining it, or prefer pragmatic choices for what seems to be most manageable. Organizations have hitherto separated target groups, ignoring the intersection of multiple social categories. It may be difficult for organizational leaders and members to discontinue equality policies and strategies that primarily focus on single categories in diversity management. They will need to shift to a reflection on, and change of, the organizational processes themselves, as intersectional equality shows how inequality is a structural problem of power. Understanding the implications of this complexity of intersectionality is not well-advanced in organizations. The dimensions introduced by intersectional equality may have different outcomes relative to organizational levels or different types of employers which will be challenging, as well.

While its practical applications provide challenges, we have some suggestions on how to proceed on such a journey. We suggest applying this concept in practice, first, where power imbalances across social locations are highly prevalent and visible in organizations. For example, it could be helpful to look at situations of bullying and sexual harassment (Hodgins et al., 2020). Not only is this topic infused with issues of power, but the literature in this area has been quite forthcoming on the ways in which power is instrumented along intersections of social locations. We suggest that coalitions across social location might be key to preventing and protecting vulnerable workers from sexual harassment (for an historical example, see Baker, 2007). A closer analysis of the organizational facilitation of coalitions across intersectional identities could be promising. Research finds, for example, that while sexual harassment self-reporting tends to hurt victims' prospects at the workplace, this is not the case if their sexual harassment is reported by someone else (Hart, 2019). Also, precarious work and weak social ties in organizations, where victims are seen as “outsiders,” tend to amplify their vulnerability (McLaughlin et al., 2017). Organizations can put intersectional equality into practice by strengthening coalitions across intersections of social location that address toxic work environments.

We take the optimistic view that intersectional equality in one organization can support and lead to the practice of intersectional equality in other social realms. Organizations may influence the “outside world” by generating economic, political, and social ripples with their own practices, as Acker states that this is performed via labor relations, compensation, or political influence (2006, p. 455ff). Intersectional equality in one organization could transform other organizations and the society in which it is imbedded. For example, Acker finds that outside pressures, both positive and negative for equality, can influence organizations. Social movements or legislation can transform organizational behavior if organizations risk loss of revenue, government contracts, or face litigation. But other pressures, for example, in globalization, can lead to less transparency and induce organizational inequalities in wages, downsizing, or outsourcing (2006, p. 458ff). Change involves an organization's interconnectedness with its political, social and economic systems, and organizations are reacting and negotiating within their contexts. In this sense, organizations are an ideal location for uncovering and counter-acting power imbalances because this meso-level can be more manageable than the macro-level of a state or the global.

Joan Acker asked in 1990 how organizations can radically change toward equality (Acker, 1990, p. 155), a question that retains its pertinence 30 years on. The literature has analyzed widely mechanisms that cause inequality but there has not been an established path forward. Inequality's dynamic change and persistence has been a challenge in practice and in theory and organizations face complex problems with incomplete knowledge of best options and choices (Cohen et al., 1972). Our approach of intersectional equality is meant to envision a transformation that can

unify and consolidate equality measures within a uniform goal. Intersectional equality can act as a standard for organizations' accountability in equality agendas and provide a systematically grounded roadmap.

Intersectional equality's contribution is both conceptual and practical. Conceptually, it provides a new perspective for understanding equality in organizations. It consolidates knowledge on inequality and equality from feminist, critical, and philosophical literature and it adds a conceptual framework to align the previously fragmented arguments around equality in organizations. Intersectional equality moves beyond the equal opportunity and diversity management approaches in its ability to provide a definition and overall visionary goal of equality. Intersectional equality's practical contribution is that it guides practitioners in gauging progress and anticipating pitfalls along the way. It helps organizational leaders to evaluate an instrument of intervention for its effectiveness across procedural, discursive, material, and affective dimensions and to monitor the organization's developments in facilitating coalition-building across intersections of social location. With intersectional equality it may be easier for practitioners to identify and intervene when power asymmetries metamorphosize unintentionally across these four dimensions of disparities. Furthermore, with intersectional equality, organizational leaders can incorporate a longer term perspective in terms of individuals' capabilities and what capabilities are valued and developed. Finally, intersectional equality provides a unique contribution because it lays the groundwork for organizations to anticipate their role in promoting social justice across social, political and economic contexts beyond themselves (Woods, 2007). As a feminist praxis, intersectional equality helps organizations commit to justice principles and have the tools to bring about this social change. We anticipate that intersectional equality not only offers a new perspective on resistance to oppression but it can stimulate further research and action to accelerate effective change.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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