The Intersectionality and Cybersecurity Toolkit

By Marissa Conway and Nehmat Kaur

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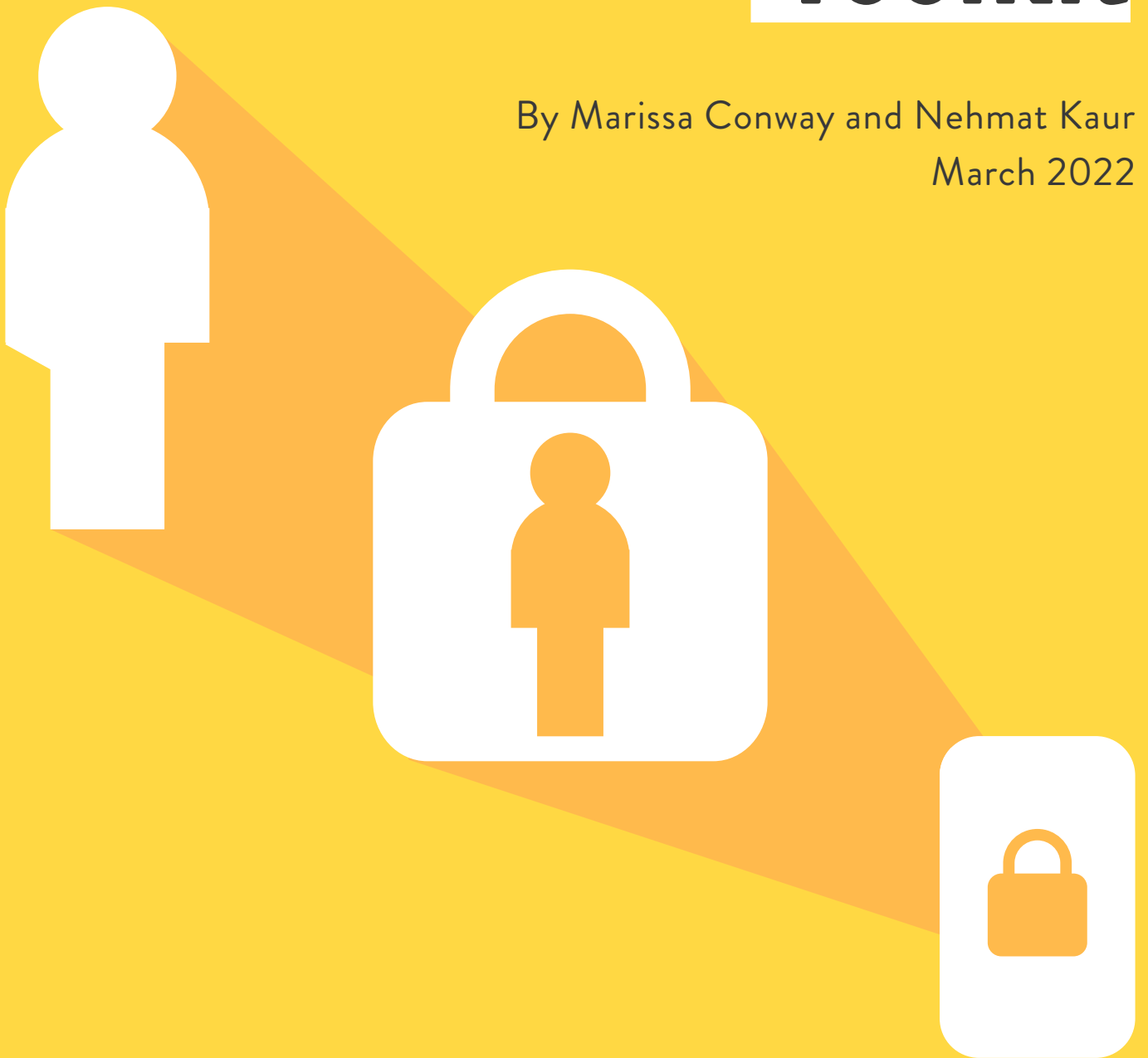
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Introduction

In 2021 the UK Government published its Integrated Review, detailing its foreign policy goals and objectives for the coming years *(Cabinet Office, 2021)*. It outlined the UK Government's clear interest in acting as a 'force for good' across all aspects of foreign policy, with commitments to defend universal human rights, promote gender equality, and promote effective and transparent governance. The review also highlights the UK Government's priority in becoming a responsible and leading cyberpower, which is echoed in the *2022 National Cyber Strategy*.

This toolkit looks at how these two goals overlap: as the UK Government continues to invest in cyber, how can cybersecurity prioritise human rights, equality, and transparency?

To explore this question, this toolkit offers an intersectional lens as an ideal method to understand and encourage the nexus of these interests. In doing so, we provide a new vision of who cybersecurity is for: instead of the needs of the state, the focus falls to the needs of people.

Intersectionality refers to the way that social categories, like gender, race, and class, overlap to shape how a person experiences discrimination *(Dunkley, Conway and Messmer, 2021).* The term 'intersectionality' was originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to describe the compounded discrimination faced by Black women in the legal system due to both their gender and race.

This toolkit will connect the local with the global and explore how individuals experience cybersecurity issues, making the case that such an approach contributes to a prosperous digital economy and resilient state. State security, too, is automatically strengthened when the needs and safety concerns of everyday people at home and abroad are kept at the core of policy decisions and implementation.

The UK's investment in cyberinfrastructure comes at a time when our lives are increasingly taking place in the digital sphere. During the first year of the pandemic, Ofcom reported that internet access in UK homes went up from 89% in 2019 to 94% *(Ofcom, 2021).* In an increasing number of countries, accessing the online world is not a novelty but a necessity in participating fully in today's economy and society. Different groups of people have different digital needs. For example, for immigrants who are reliant on accessing the online world to communicate with their families or to receive money, participating in the online world is requisite. The digital world is for everyone, and cybersecurity must be designed to ensure this.

About this Toolkit

This toolkit aims to equip its readers with how to use an intersectional lens to explore and rethink cybersecurity. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Introduce intersectionality
2. Reconceptualise cybersecurity's purpose as protecting people
3. Provide pathways for actioning an intersectional lens in cybersecurity
4. Share complimentary resources for further learning

We align the focus of this toolkit with the fourth pillar of the National Cyber Security Strategy, which cites that an **"open, peaceful and secure cyberspace remains critical to our collective security and prosperity"** *(Cabinet Office, 2022).* This pillar speaks to the holistic ecosystem of cyberspace and orientates its purpose toward peace.

By invoking an intersectional lens to unpack this pillar, we can:

✓ **Understand how marginalised and protected communities are impacted differentially and specifically by cyber threats**

✓ **View cybersecurity issues from multiple perspectives**

✓ **Identify a wider range of available solutions to cybersecurity challenges**

The first half of this toolkit will explore the concept of intersectionality and how it can be used as a lens to reconceptualise the purpose of cybersecurity. The second half of this toolkit will examine what it means to have an 'open, peaceful and secure cyberspace'. We have also built an **Intersectionality and Cybersecurity Resource Dashboard** with further resources and recommended readings for those interested in continued learning.

Who can use this toolkit?

This toolkit is first and foremost designed for civil servants and policymakers at all levels working on cybersecurity issues in the UK Government. It can be used either in tandem with existing gender-sensitive resources and methods or as a stand-alone introduction to inclusivity and equity. The UK Government has the power and a unique opportunity to set the standards for how our online world evolves and develops. As such, this toolkit encourages its readers to engage more deeply in exploring power dynamics and the responsibility to craft an open, secure, and peaceful cyberspace. That said, we believe that anyone interested in the subject matter will find its contents of use.

Methodology

We are grateful to the cohort of cybersecurity and intersectionality experts who contributed to the production of this toolkit. A combination of roundtable discussions, 1:1 conversations, and peer review processes were held in shaping this toolkit's formation. We conducted further desk research to identify existing resources compiled in the **Intersectionality and Cybersecurity Resource Dashboard**.

Limitations and further research

This toolkit is an ambitious exploration of intersectionality and cybersecurity, and we recognise that there is only so much content that can be covered in one publication. It has been designed as a first step in encouraging continued conversations on intersectionality as the UK Government builds its cyberinfrastructure.

The experts we consulted with represented a range of age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation, among other social categories, however most were from High-Income Countries (HICs). Further research that incorporates an even broader range of perspectives, especially from Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), can only benefit this conversation.

We hope that this toolkit will inspire different ways of thinking about cybersecurity and emphasise the usefulness of incorporating an intersectional lens across cybersecurity and all foreign policy.

SECTION 1:
KEY CONCEPTS
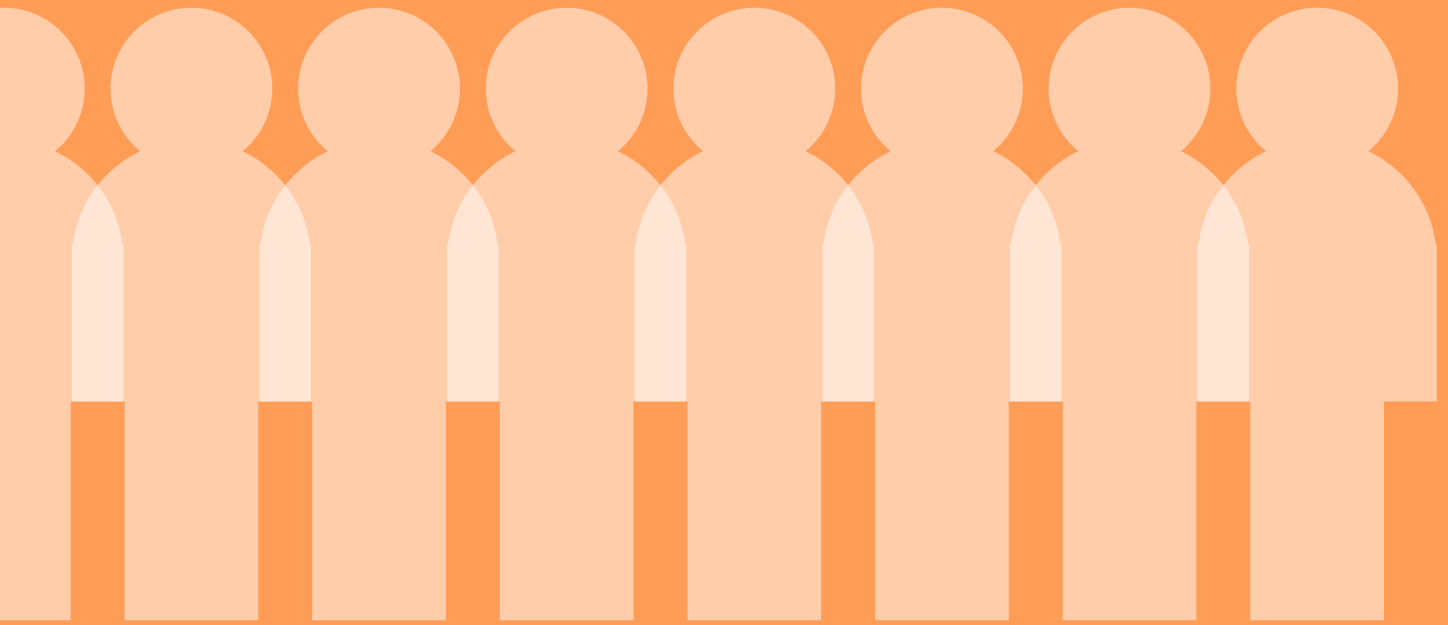
An Introduction to Intersectionality

"An intersectional approach allows us to see who falls through the cracks and how combined identities means some people fall further – and thus are harder to see – than others." *Seyi Akiwowo, Glitch UK Founder and Executive Director*

The term 'intersectionality' was originally coined by Kimberle Crenshaw *(1991)* to describe the compounded discrimination faced by Black women in the legal system due to both their gender and race. The term, with roots in critical race theory and feminist theory, has evolved and expanded and today is used to describe how the discrimination and marginalisation someone experiences isn't solely isolated to a single social category, like gender. Instead, a person's different social categories, like gender, class, race, ethnicity, language, age, ability, citizenship status, religion, among others, all interact to shape how they have access to power or are prevented from accessing power *(Carastathis, 2014).*

Intersectionality also understands social categories and their relationship to power and vulnerability relative to time and space *(Carastathis, 2014).* For example, certain groups, such as journalists, political dissenters, or whistle-blowers, have concerns about secure and safe internet access and usage. However, in an internet shutdown, every person affected has increased vulnerability due to the increased difficulty accessing information or urgent services in real-time.

'Marginalisation' refers to the processes or conditions that prevent people and communities from accessing social, economic, political, or symbolic power. Structural discrimination due to a person's social categories, such as gender, race, or class, are the root causes of marginalisation *(Mannon Daniels, 2022).*

Despite increasing efforts to address inequality within and through foreign policy initiatives, this toolkit recognises that systemic oppression due to a person's social categories is still too commonplace. Using an intersectional lens can reveal 'hidden' inequalities and paint a more comprehensive picture of how and why people are experiencing oppression. If we take this lens to cybersecurity, intersectionality can shed light on different perspectives, experiences, and power dynamics by asking questions like:

- **Whose views are reflected in cybersecurity policy, and whose views are left out?**
- **Who will be impacted, positively or negatively, by cybersecurity policy?**
- **How are vulnerabilities exacerbated or remedied by cybersecurity policy?**

Asking such questions means an open, peaceful, and secure cyberspace becomes more possible.

Questions for reflection:

– How does my identity shape my access to power?

– How does my access to power influence how I do my work?

– What blind spots might I have because of my access to power?

Gender Equality vs Intersectionality: What's the Difference?

Intersectionality and gender equality are related concepts but have important distinctions.

Gender is a power hierarchy typically expressed through masculine or feminine coded characteristics. Gender exists on a spectrum with various gender identities, yet the term is often conflated with 'woman' or understood as a binary of man or woman (*Dunkely, Conway, and Messmer, 2021*). Gender equality refers to the ambition that a person's quality of life and access to opportunities isn't dependent on their gender (*UN Women, 2022*). An increasing number of states and multilateral institutions have focused on gender equality as an objective and implemented mechanisms like gender mainstreaming or gender-responsive budgeting.

Intersectionality speaks to how overlapping identities produce oppression, of which gender is one. An intersectional analysis goes beyond the scope of gender equality initiatives as it draws attention to the systemic and hierarchical nature of oppression across multiple social categories. Despite the distinctions between the two, gender equality and intersectionality are united in their quest to set new equity norms.

Balancing Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

To achieve this new norm, the path forward must balance short-term and long-term goals.

Short-term goals focus on inclusion in existing systems, such as greater diversity in representation. These aspects are necessary to ensure that any policy creation process includes diverse voices and perspectives, both within the government and externally with stakeholders.
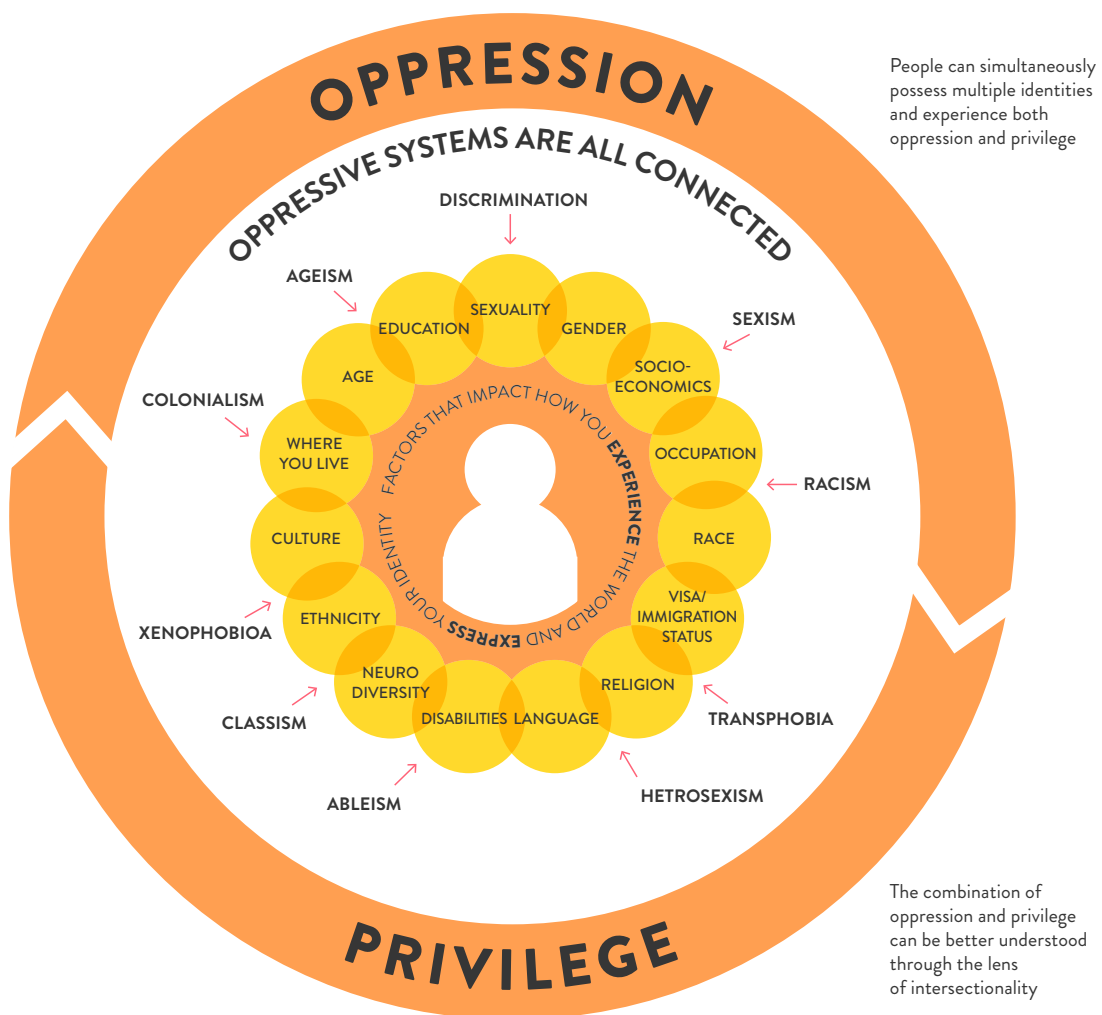
Long-term goals focus on addressing the root causes of inequality at a systemic level with an eye to institutional reform and culture change.

Some states are beginning to engage with the concept of intersectionality, predominately through Feminist Foreign Policy frameworks. In most cases, this type of engagement focuses solely on short-term goals and inclusion in existing systems, with little to no thought about systems change. However, without an explicit aim of implementing systems change, the symptoms of inequality will continue to perpetuate, and no real progress toward equality will be made.

It is important to note, however, that intersectionality isn't an end goal, but a process in and of itself. It is not a state to be achieved, but an action to be continually implemented that has associated norms and aims.

Questions for reflection:

— What is the balance between short-term and long-term equity and equality goals in my work?

— What steps can I take to ensure an even balance between the two?

People can simultaneously possess multiple identities and experience both oppression and privilege

The combination of oppression and privilege can be better understood through the lens of intersectionality

This image has been adapted from the YSCA Australia's toolkit *"Y Advocacy? An Intersectional Feminist Toolkit."* Image description: An oppression/privilege wheel demonstrating how oppressive systems are all interconnected. The first layer of the when includes discrimination, sexism, racism, transphobia, heterosexism, ableism, classism, xenophobia, colonialism, and ageism. The next layer includes sexuality, gender, socioeconomics, occupation, race, visa/immigration stats, religion, language, disabilities, neurodiversity, ethnicity, culture, where you live, age, and education. The innermost layer says 'factors that impact how you experience the world and express your identity'.

Unpacking the Idea of 'Security'

This toolkit uses human security in outlining a definition of 'security'.

According to the CRISE Network at the University of Oxford, the purpose of human security is to "safeguard the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfillment" *(Alkire, 2003).* It aims to protect people from events beyond their control and centres people, not states, as subject.

Safety means more than physical protection from conflict or war. Human security looks at what makes people, not states, safe. Threats to safety include unstable economies, human rights violations, social and political discrimination, unaffordable housing, food insecurity, and unaffordable healthcare. All of these issues fall outside the sole domain of military force, where the responsibility for security has traditionally been thought to lie, but robust national security means taking these aspects seriously *(Tadjbakhsh, 2005).*

Security is subjective and personal and what makes someone feel safe differs from person to person *(Holistic Security, 2022a).* Here the necessity of an intersectional lens becomes clear. Human security disrupts traditional and mainstream ideas about security as state-focused, but an intersectional lens is necessary to further point to how modern social, political, and economic systems often function to prevent marginalised people from feeling safe and secure and how policy has the power to exacerbate or reconcile this.
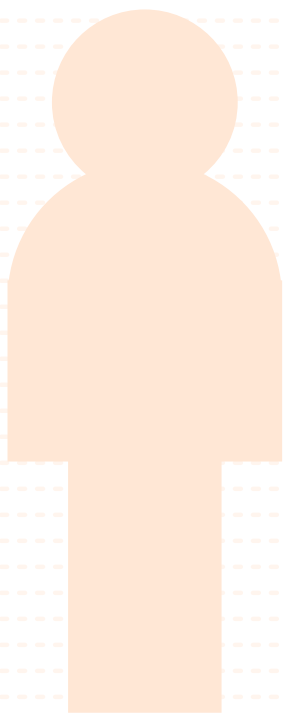
Looking at Cybersecurity Differently

According to the *National Security Cyber Centre (2022)*, cybersecurity is defined as how people and organisations reduce the risk of a cyberattack. Cybersecurity aims to protect hardware, software, and digital services from theft or damage.

This toolkit offers a new definition of cybersecurity:

The purpose of cybersecurity is to make cyberspace safe for all. People have a right to safely access and participate in the online world free from persecution. This includes protection from online violence, cyberattacks, and privacy infringements. When this right has been violated, clear and victim-supportive pathways to seek justice are in place.

This definition dramatically expands the scope of cybersecurity, yet still sits comfortably alongside the UK Government's intentions with cyberinfrastructure. In Pillar 2 of the *UK's National Cybersecurity Strategy (2022)*, the reduction of cyber risks is prioritised, in part, so that "citizens are more secure online and confident that their data is protected." Pillar 4 of the strategy highlights a commitment to address global governance challenges in cyberspace in keeping with its stated human rights and democratic values. These ambitions can be read harmoniously alongside this toolkit's definition of cybersecurity and the objectives of creating and maintaining an open, secure, and peaceful cyberspace.

Questions for reflection:

– What makes you feel safe and secure *(Holistic Security, 2022b)*?

– What actions do you regularly take to ensure the safety of you and your loved ones *(Holistic Security, 2022b)*?

– How does your access to power influence how you stay safe and secure?
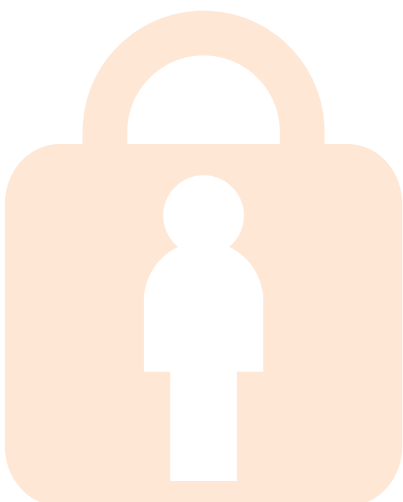
SECTION 2: TAKING ACTION

How to: Build Greater Transparency in Cyber Practices

*Building an **open**, peaceful and secure cyberspace*

An open cyberspace means a transparent cyberspace. However, many cybersecurity practices are shrouded in secrecy, presenting ill-intentioned actors with opportunities to exploit weak self-regulatory structures (*di Meco, 2022*). Private technology companies, in particular, have historically been unwilling to share information about their algorithmic, data, and privacy practices and policies as they currently profit from them (*Engler, 2020*). This murky cyber environment prevents accountability, allows unethical actors to evade oversight, and further impedes many marginalised groups of people from feeling like the online world is a safe space for them.

Two key questions can frame approaches to transparency when designing regulatory frameworks and systems:

– When the needs of marginalised people are centred and prioritised, what should the online world look like?

– What measurement and accountability systems must be built to know this is being achieved (*Beall, C., 2022*)?

Transparency in data practices

Data is a form of power and can be used to obscure or reveal, exploit or empower. Current data practices, when uncritical, reflect the patriarchal, capitalist, and racist status quo. Ensuring open cyberspace is accessible and safe for all means reforming how we collect, use, and understand data so that biases found in society aren't further perpetuated. In the long term, this means creating an online space where human rights are safeguarded, where technology corporations operate under clear accountability frameworks, and transparency across the sector is standard *(G7 Information Centre, 2021)*. In the short term, it means reforming how data is used to shape the world around us.

Data alone cannot fix the root causes of systemic oppression. However, it can be a useful resource to understand the breadth of compounding disadvantages and discrimination and, therefore, understand how to redress them *(Christoffersen, 2017; Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, 2021)*.

Intersectional approaches to data take a particular focus on data collection and disaggregation and query the following *(Balestra and Fleischer, 2018; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018)*:

Are current data collection processes and methodologies conducive to generating disaggregated data?

- In what ways do current data practices put marginalised people at risk? How can this be remedied?
- What standards for disaggregated data exist in your work, and how do they compare to standards in other countries or multilateral bodies?
- What steps can be taken to ensure better recording of disaggregated data in your work?
- How can published data more effectively identify and analyse intersecting identities and hidden inequalities?
- What processes must be implemented to ensure that data privacy protection mechanisms are continually improved?

Building institutional transparency with reflexivity

A common feminist practice is the act of reflexivity, which is the process of reflecting on your own social power and biases. It encourages greater awareness of how "social, cultural, political, economic aspects of their own background, experience, education and embodied presence in the world" have shaped your worldview and intellectual standpoint (*University of York, 2022*).

The creation of more transparent practices starts with reflexivity. Reflecting on how policy institutions can adapt and transform to better meet the needs of marginalised people is the first step to reforming the patriarchal, capitalist, and racist norms that shape modern UK policy to begin with. But reflexivity isn't just a practice for institutions, it's also a practice for individuals (*Knowledge Translation Network, 2022*). Engaging with the following questions can serve as a jumping off point to fortifying more robust systems of accountability:

— Whose point of view is reflected when defining cybersecurity and data practice problems?

— Who decides what information gaps are being systemically addressed, and how is this being acted upon?

— How is the quality of data regulated?

— How are staff made aware of and included in ongoing institutional reflexivity practices?

— How are avenues for civil society to feed into transparency efforts being increased?
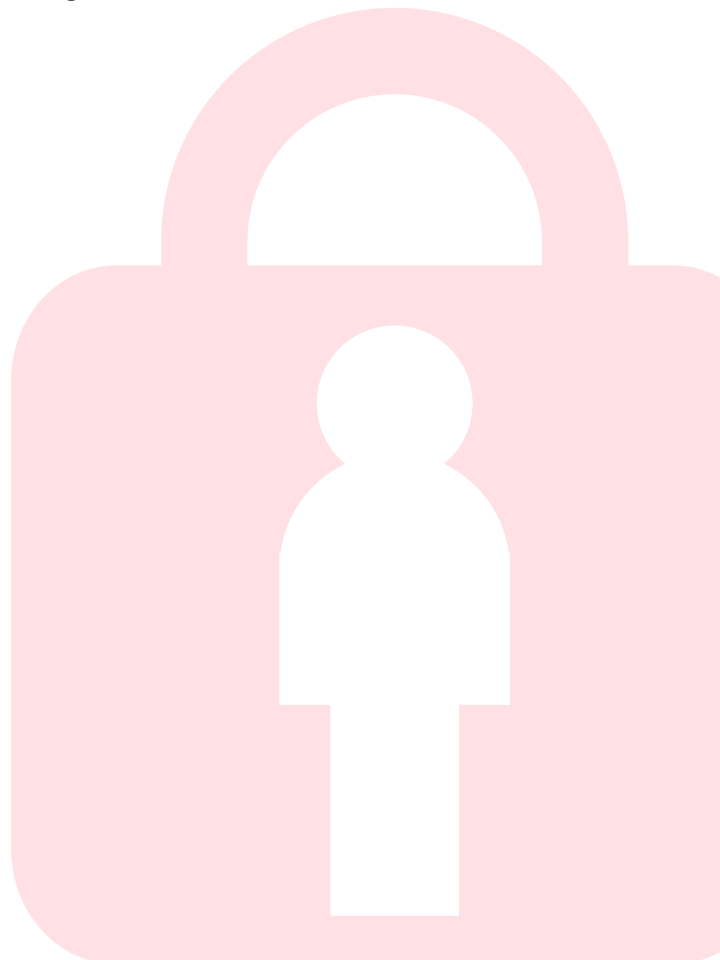
How to: Ensure Safe Internet Access

*Building an open, **peaceful** and secure cyberspace*

A peaceful cyberspace means building processes and infrastructure so that experiences of online violence and harassment are outliers, not the norm. In the short term, this begins with addressing and preventing the high rates of online abuse experienced by marginalised groups. In the long term, this includes addressing the root causes of inequality in society, including sexism, racism, and classism (among others).

This section of the toolkit will build on the short-term goal of addressing and preventing online abuse. In the past few years, as we increasingly spend our daily lives online, there has been a rise in online abuse and harassment. For example, the Government Equalities Office reported that in 2019 only 5% of workplace sexual harassment occurred online *(Adams etal. 2020)*. In a survey conducted by Rights of Women in 2020, 42% of women reported that workplace sexual harassment occurred online *(Rights of Women, 2020)*.

What happens when we take an intersectional look at online abuse? In one study, 29% of women reported worsening online abuse during the pandemic. However, once disaggregated data is taken into account, this figure increases to 38% for Black and minoritised women and non-binary people *(Glitch UK and End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2020)*. For disabled people, this figure jumps to 52% *(Freeman-Powell, 2021)*.

According to Glitch UK (2022), online abuse refers to the range of harmful tactics and acts experienced by individuals online. This can include (among many other actions) offensive comments, threats of violence, or bullying. It is distinct from offline abuse due to "the reach, speed, amplification and permanence of abusive content".

To manage and prevent escalating online abuse, considerations in the project planning phase of policy work hold opportunities to systematically ensure any new projects meaningfully addresses online abuse:

Exploring the impact:

☐ When implementing policy change, allocate funding to research how it will impact the individual. How might some communities be impacted differently than others?

☐ Run paid consultations and speak to a range of individuals impacted differently.

☐ Explore the difference in state security concerns versus individual security concerns. Where and why do they stand in contrast? How can this gap be bridged?

☐ Analyse how this policy change might uphold aspects of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy. What steps can be taken to implement systemic change through this piece of work?

Fortifying Regulations:

☐ Audit the regulatory frameworks concerning with protecting people from online abuse. How does your work incorporate these?

☐ Analyse how existing regulations fall short in the context of your work. How can additional commitments be implemented to protect people from online abuse?

How to: Conduct Intersectional Consultations

*Building an open, peaceful and **secure** cyberspace*

A secure cyberspace means ensuring people feel safe. An intersectional approach means that people's lived experiences are taken seriously when developing and enacting cybersecurity measures. In the long term, this means crafting a space where historically marginalised people can participate online without fear of persecution. This section will detail conducting intersectional consultations to prioritise lived experiences as a key informant for policy formation.

Stakeholder and power mapping

Using intersectionality as an analytical tool to explore invites a curiosity about power dynamics: who has power, who doesn't, and why. Stakeholder mapping through an intersectional lens also invokes a process of power mapping to explore these questions. A list of stakeholders might usually look like a laundry list of names of institutions. Stakeholder mapping through a power map would focus more on the nexus of power and needs:

ACCESS TO POWER

NEEDS ARE NOT BEING MET

NEEDS ARE BEING MET
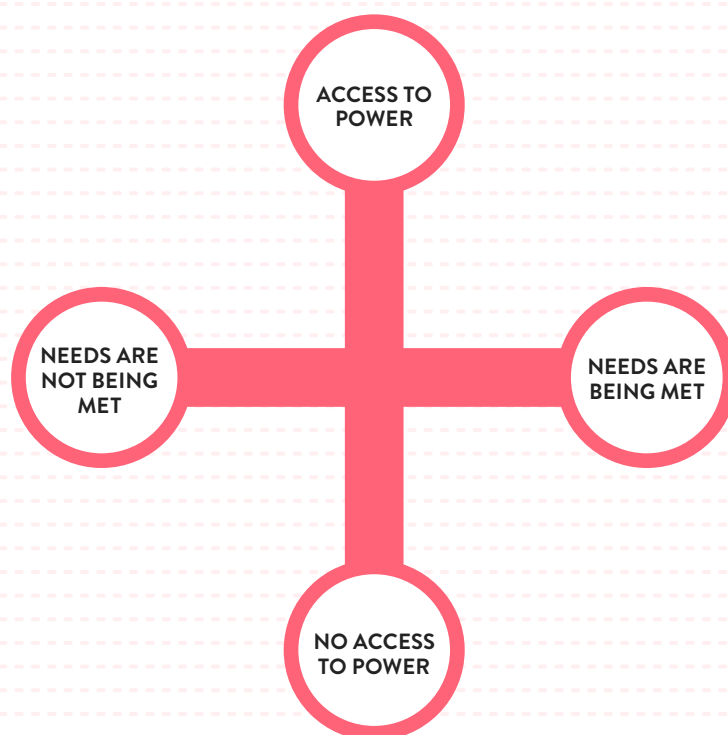
NO ACCESS TO POWER

Adapted from The Change Agency's *(2022)* power mapping exercise. Image description: An XY graph to plot people in relation to access/no access to power, how needs are being met/not met.

Next, it is necessary to ask why different stakeholders are positioned where they are on the map to explore the systems that maintain power hierarchies.

This exercise helps to visualise how diverse consultations are and where the balance of power lies in who is taken seriously in policy formation processes.

Enabling participation in the consultation process
(GAPS UK, 2020)

☐ Audit the tools and mechanisms used to accommodate the needs of those involved in the consultation process. Are people who are not digitally literate, have disabilities, or don't speak English, for example, going to be able to participate fully?

☐ Develop clear safeguarding and consent protocols for participation. Will someone's safety and security be at risk if they participate, i.e., undocumented immigrants?

☐ Allocate funding to reimburse people for their time and contribution. If travel is necessary for in-person meetings, cover travel and care costs to enable those with caring responsibilities to participate.

Acting on the consultation results
(GAPS UK, 2020)

☐ Audit the systems in already place to ensure the results of the consultation are taken seriously and acted upon. Are they reflected in just this work or incorporated into wider institutional practices?

☐ Review how stakeholders are acknowledged and credited for their contributions. When consent is given, how is the time and insight of stakeholders acknowledged?

☐ Check what feedback mechanisms are in place for comments and concerns after the consultation. Do stakeholders have safe and accessible ways to provide feedback into ongoing monitoring and evaluation practices for consultations?

☐ Look at how stakeholder relationships are maintained after the consultation. Do pathways to policymakers remain open, especially for people who are typically ignored in the policymaking process?

ANNEXE

The Intersectionality and Cybersecurity Toolkit

Questions for Self-Reflection

— How does my identity shape my access to power?

— Where might I lack awareness because of my access
to power?

— How does my access to power influence how
I do my work?

— How am I creating more space to address the needs
of marginalised people in my work?

— What steps can I take to learn more about power
inequalities?

About the Authors

Marissa Conway is an award-winning activist and Feminist Foreign Policy expert. She is the Co-Founder and UK Executive Director of the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. She regularly consults with organisations and governments worldwide to design feminist approaches to longstanding foreign and security policy problems. Marissa's expertise and insights have been featured in the BBC, the New York Times, Foreign Policy, and more. In 2019 she was named on the Forbes 30 Under 30 List 2019 in recognition of her work.

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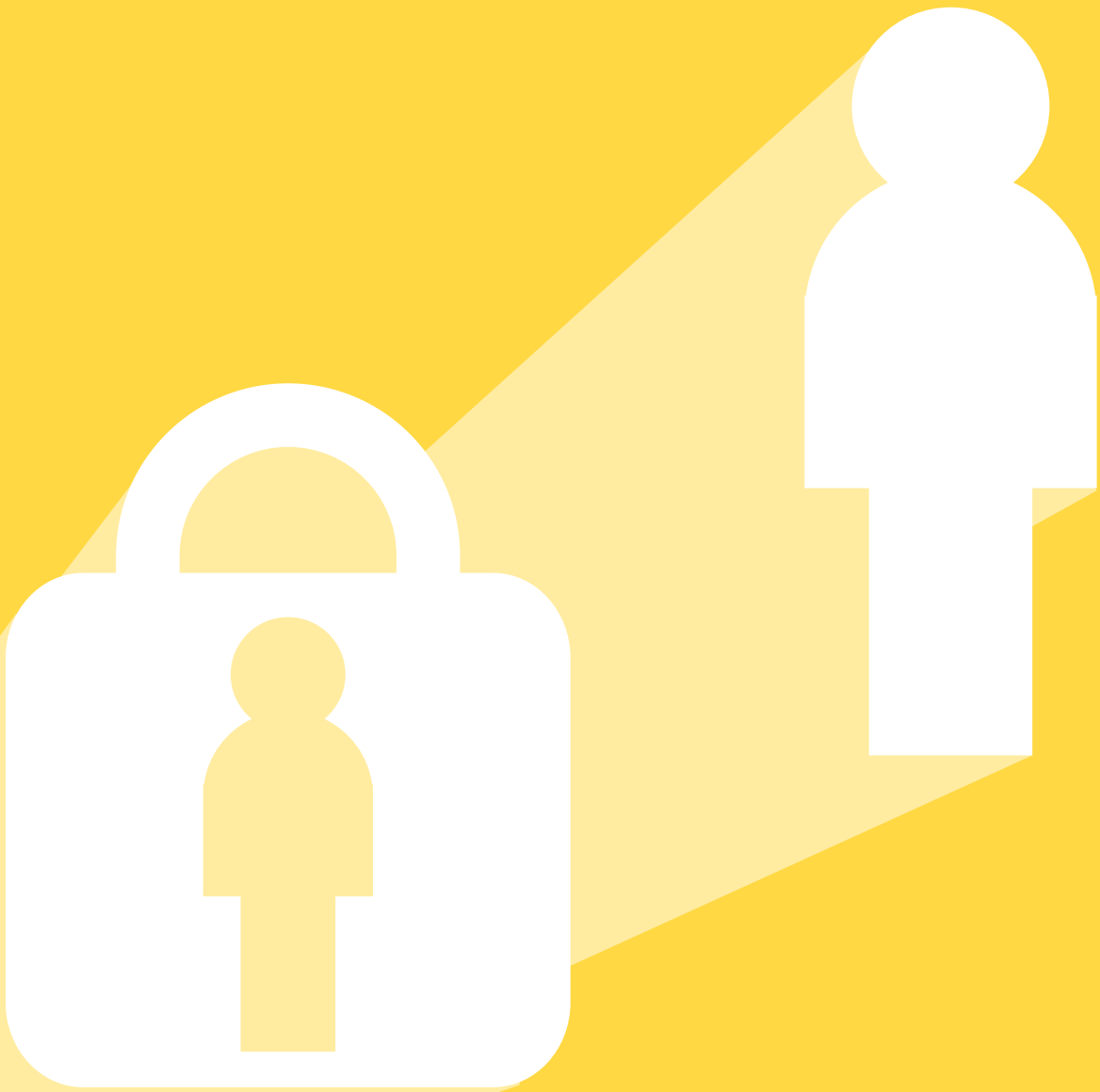
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