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We are pleased to partner with Refinery29 and National Geographic on this important research that we hope will change the game for our industry as we do our part for gender equality in the workplace and in society. As marketers, we are powerful influencers when it comes to how women are perceived and stereotyped in their cultures. This, in turn, has an impact on educational and economic opportunities and even on civil rights and personal safety. As employers, we are compelled to work toward equality because it's good business and, frankly, because we should all do what we can to do right by all of our talent. Which brings me to the point of this research: We need to ensure that we support and leverage ALL women. So far in our industry, and in business in general, that is not the case.

In the U.S., although 40% of ad-agency execs are now women, less than 1% are Black/African American, and we're not doing much better with other underrepresented groups. Among chief marketing officers for the top 100 global brands, only 23% are women and only 6% are People of Color — for Women of Color we are basically counting fingers on one hand. The same holds true for the broadcast media industry, publishing, and the tech sector. If you look at the “top” lists for our industry, or the speakers lists at our conferences and panels, you will be hard-pressed to find critical masses of women who are not white and not from the U.S., U.K., or Australia — this holds true even at industry events in markets like China and India.

This research is important because it sparks awareness, begins an important conversation, and will ideally drive action. The insights clearly indicate that solutions — and marketing messages — can't address women as if they are a monolithic group and as though their challenges are all the same. We also can't expect our workplace and industry initiatives focused on gender diversity to drive progress for all women if we don't tailor our approaches.

Our new research indicates the salience of the basic idea behind the theory of “intersectionality” – that multiple dimensions of identity must be considered to really understand and change how women experience their lives. Women with different identities do not judge the inclusiveness of gender-equality efforts or respond to brand messages in the same way. And it shows that some women feel privileged based on dimensions of identity such as race/ethnicity/nationality, physical ability, class, education, and even skin tone, while others feel disadvantaged. These and other identities matter because aspirations, confidence levels, the pulls of motherhood or eldercare, stereotypes, and almost everything else is different when you look beyond gender. One size does not fit all either within or across borders, as women want to be valued based on all of their identities.

In the coming months and years, we plan to continue pressing for more understanding of intersectionality, more authentic interest in the issues, and strategic action to be more inclusive when it comes to tackling gender issues. For us, this research is an exciting step in what we know will be a long journey. We hope you will come along!

Heide Gardner
Chief Diversity & Inclusion Officer, IPG



INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1960s, feminism and women’s issues have been at the forefront of politics and pop culture. “The personal is political”¹ became second-wave feminism’s rallying cry, bringing topics like reproductive rights, equal pay, and the sexual double standard into the public discourse. But more recently, another concept has started to creep into the conversation: intersectionality. First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989,² the term “intersectionality” has come to embody the understanding that different forms of discrimination (think racism and sexism) will overlap, intersect, and multiply. The term might have a technical, academic background, but it surfaces in the zeitgeist as a lived experience for many women.

On April 18, 2017, Refinery29, National Geographic, and IPG embarked on a research study to explore the intersection of identities within the realm of womanhood. When we looked beyond gender, we found that women define themselves through myriad identities. The story that emerges is fragmented — it might be easy to think of women as one homogeneous group, but the shared experiences of women can feel segmented and unequal. In fact, only a third of women surveyed agree with the phrase, “Being a woman is a common experience.”

So where do the experiences of different women converge, and where do they diverge? Ahead, a closer look at how women see themselves and how they believe the world sees them.

¹ Hanisch, Carol. “The Personal Is Political.” Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists (1970): 76–78.

² Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

METHODOLOGY

Refinery29 wrote and executed a 111-question online survey, translated by a third-party vendor for international markets, producing this white paper in partnership with IPG and National Geographic. The survey first asked respondents to identify their race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and work status and then delved into their opinions on everything from workplace diversity to their advantages and disadvantages in life.

In total, we surveyed 4,750 women ages 16 and up in five different markets: the United States (2,911 respondents), the United Kingdom (508 respondents), Brazil (502 respondents), India (500 respondents), and China (329).

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FINDINGS

Regardless of age, ethnicity, or geography, our findings indicate that gender is consistently considered an important part of our respondents' identity. Yet, being female is just one of many categories that frame how our respondents view and interact with the world; education, ethnicity, age, accent, and body size are also key factors.

In fact, the characteristics that women choose as "identity defining" cluster differently by geography, age, size, etc. Take geography, for example. When we break down the data by country, what women consider important to their identity shifts drastically.

WHAT DEFINES YOU?

GLOBAL	UK	BRAZIL	CHINA	INDIA	US
Level of Education	Age	Level of Education	Level of Education	Accent/ Articulation	Gender
Gender	Accent/ Articulation	Gender	Nationality	Age	Age
Age	Gender	Accent/ Articulation	Body Size	Class	Ethnicity
Accent/ Articulation	Class	Physical Ability	Religion	Body Size	Natural Intelligence
Body Size	Body Size	Skin Tone	Age	Ethnicity	Level of Education

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The most frequent identity-defining characteristics chosen when we asked women to rank their top five aspects of their identity.

In the United States, with its diverse “melting pot,” ethnicity becomes more important to our respondents. In more ethnically homogeneous countries, however, ethnicity may not factor into the top markers. In the U.K. and India, for example, class as well as accent and articulation emerge as powerful shapers of identity.

Areas of conflict and discrimination, it seems, are more likely to be identity-defining factors. In China, where questions of autonomy for ethnic minorities and nationalities have historically been a source of conflict,³ our respondents are most likely to consider their nationality a significant aspect of identity that informs their physical safety. In the U.K., where accent and articulation ranks as the second most popular aspect of identity, 25% of respondents consider their accent an advantage in their life – following their level of education and their natural intelligence. And in India, women consider their education, class, and ethnicity as key influencers of their social privilege, in that order.

³ Human Rights In China. “China: Minority Exclusion, Marginalization and Rising Tensions.” Minority Rights Group, Apr. 2007. Web. June 2017.

In the U.S. specifically, where cultural diversity shapes the zeitgeist, women are more likely to identify strongly with their ethnicity when they do not see their ethnicity as indicating privilege. For example, 78% of respondents in the U.S. believe that white people have more privilege than any other racial group. But while 56% of women of color consider their ethnicity a key component of their identity, only 40% of white women feel the same.

These areas of privilege are hardly inconsequential — how someone is perceived in the world has real-life effects in both professional and social spheres. Studies have found that racial attitudes in the United States have adverse effects on the physical health, mental health, and economic status of minority groups.⁴ The remaining question is how overlapping systems of oppression and discrimination affect those who reside at the intersection of different identities. Ahead, we'll look at four aspects that affect the way our respondents navigate the world.

GENDER

There is no question that a woman's gender is a primary marker of her identity. Globally, 49% of women say that their gender is most often used to identify them, while 26% of women say that it affects how they're perceived.

Conclusions as to whether this is an advantage or disadvantage are mixed. When asked what aspect of their identity is a disadvantage in their life, 24% of women surveyed chose gender — the most popular choice, followed by age at 24%. 17% of respondents, however, chose gender when asked about advantages in their life. In fact, most global respondents do not consider gender a primary influence on their future success, weighing their education level, natural intelligence, mental health, and class as more significant.

⁴ Williams, David R., and Selina A. Mohammed. "Racism and Health I: Pathways and Scientific Evidence." *The American behavioral scientist* 57.8 (2013): 10.1177/0002764213487340. PMC. Web. 15 June 2017.

In navigating social spaces, however, gender rises in importance. Globally, gender is the fourth most important factor when it comes to our respondents' status in society. When looking specifically at women in the United States, it is the third most important aspect. And in China and India, respondents are more likely to agree with the statement, "A woman's social standing is primarily based on her gender."

Our respondents' gender is also the most influential when it comes to physical safety. Globally, 28% of those surveyed feel that being female has the greatest impact on their safety; this is followed by physical ability and age. When shifting consideration from identity to environment, respondents focus on more practical elements. 41% of respondents say they feel safer when they are traveling with more than one person — more specifically, it seems, when they're traveling with people they trust. Those surveyed wrote in that they feel safe when "I'm within a diverse environment," when "I know my surroundings," and when "I'm with like-minded people." One common written response? "When I'm with my husband."

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ETHNICITY

While gender consistently comes to the forefront in discussions of external perception, our data become more interesting when we start to look at which groups consider gender to be the most important visual identity marker (as opposed to age, body type, and ethnicity).

Our data reveal that white women in the United States are significantly more likely to feel gender is their primary identity marker (60%) but are also most likely to disagree with the statement, "A woman's social standing is primarily based on her gender." They are more likely to feel defined by being a woman, without feeling limited by it.

When we shift our attention to Black women in the United States, especially comparing them to the aggregate population of women, the story changes. Looking at the general population of the country, a 25- to 44-year-old woman in the United States with a Bachelor's degree is most likely to consider her gender a disadvantage (42%), followed by her ethnicity (25%), class (13%), and skin tone (13%). But for a Black woman, with all other aspects identical, the perspective is completely different. She still considers her gender a disadvantage, but she is significantly more likely to note her ethnicity (45%) and skin tone (30%) as disadvantages.

Our data show that women of different ethnicities feel the compounded burden of their identities in conflicting ways. 28% of white women surveyed say, "I never think about my ethnicity," but only 10% of women of color say that. That awareness of their ethnicity does not necessarily have a negative connotation. 47% of women of color surveyed say their ethnicity makes them feel proud; 44% say it makes them feel beautiful.

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However, those internal views of their ethnicity are not always perceived as being mirrored in society. 37% of women of color feel stereotyped because of their ethnicity; 19% feel judged as inferior; 16% feel judged as unqualified. These effects are magnified for Black women in particular. 46% of Black women feel stereotyped because of their ethnicity; 31% of them feel judged as inferior; 26% feel judged as unqualified. As a stark contrast, only 20% of white women feel stereotyped for their ethnicity, 6% feel judged as inferior, and 5% feel judged as unqualified.

One possible explanation for this might be the limited representations of women of color in the media. Those we surveyed were most likely to want better representations of their ethnicity — prioritizing it over representation of body size, age, and gender. "I'd like to see [my ethnicity] represented in a variety of ways — not just as people in need but people of capacity, resilience, intelligence, and resourcefulness," one Black woman wrote in. The common ask was to show a variety of portrayals that don't depend on the character's ethnicity as a one-dimensional plot point. " There is more to ethnicity

than food and costumes, which are the more visible representation of ethnic identity that are represented in media,” an Asian woman wrote in. And even more specifically, from a Latinx woman: “I want to see Latinx kids coming up on the punk scene in South Central Los Angeles. Quinceañeras in bare backyards. I want to see the Latina who works in housekeeping and isn’t just a supporting character/comedic relief for a white man learning about karma.”

AGE AND BODY

Ethnicity might have the most identity-defining impact among women of color, but age and body type is more prevalent when looking at the full global population.

26% of all respondents consider age a top identity definer in how they are perceived in society, but the effects of age are felt primarily by women older than 45. Respondents in this age group are more likely to feel that their age is tied to their future success and status in society but also most likely to find their physical safety affected by their age. In the workplace, this group is less likely to feel appreciated, less likely to feel autonomy in their work, and ultimately less likely to see the opportunity to bring forth their ideas (31%, 30%, and 32%, compared to 36%, 35%, and 37% overall). And in media, they’re likely to want better representation of other women in their age range. “Age 50+ is not doddering; it is not on the doorstep of assisted living; it is not an indicator of how tech-savvy one is,” one respondent wrote. “Age is not the inability to hear, understand, or be ambulatory,” echoed a second statement.

At the other end of the spectrum, respondents ages 16 to 20 in the U.S. specifically are more likely to want better representation of body sizes. “Where...the star of the show can just be big...and not be forced onto a diet or [subjected to] cruel jokes,” one respondent wrote in. Succinctly put: “Everyone doesn’t have to be petite or skinny to be influential or intelligent.”

26% of women globally feel their body size plays a major role in how they are perceived. In China specifically, body size is the most important influencer in perception; in the U.S., it is the second, following gender. In both countries, our respondents consider body size their third most powerful disadvantage.

While these two aspects of identity do affect all women regardless of ethnicity, white women might feel the effects more acutely. While women of color are most likely to have been in situations where they were one of a few people of their ethnicity, white women are most likely to report having been one of a few people with their body size — and thus they are significantly more likely to consider their age or body size a disadvantage in their life.

WHAT DOES THIS ALL MEAN?

Viewing gender as a single homogeneous monolith is too limited an approach. Women, while considering gender as an important factor in their identity, never solely identify as women. Among many other things, they can be plus-sized, middle-aged, biracial, well-educated, career-driven, and ultimately complicated.

The way they view the world has been shaped by these many layers of identity. Unfortunately, the way the world sees and reflects them — another important factor in defining these identities — very rarely aligns with this nuanced approach.

54% of women believe there are too many stereotypes in the marketing they see, and more than half of our respondents note that the portrayals available are not relevant to them.

And the dangers of limited portrayals extend beyond stereotyping. 48% of the women surveyed say that they or someone they know have personally experienced an act of discrimination. In India, 75% of respondents agree with the statement, “Some castes are discriminated against or treated unfairly.” And 31% feel that their caste in particular is subject to discrimination. Meanwhile, in the United States, 91% of respondents believe it is a problem that some groups of people are treated differently than others. 88% believe that members of various groups in America are discriminated against or oppressed.

When it comes to gender equality, respondents believe more work needs to be done. 53% of women globally believe gender equality has yet to be achieved (that number rises to 77% in the U.S. specifically). And change seems to be more necessary in the office; while 58% of respondents say there is movement for equality in society, only 45% say that movement is happening in the workplace.

Generally, the lack of change has been felt most strongly in the United States. 50% of U.S. respondents say that the movement towards equality is not inclusive of all groups they identify with (compared to 33% globally); 53% say they haven’t noticed any efforts to improve gender equality in the workplace over the last year (compared to 37% globally). The emotional response to the lack of change, unfortunately, seems bleak: “It’s not a new concept. Older, wealthy, white men have always been at the top of the food chain while lower-income, darker skin, gay people are not,” one respondent wrote. “I feel hopeless that this will change.”

Part of the problem may be inaction or indifference on a personal level: While one in three women surveyed says, “I actively work to keep inherent biases out of my thoughts,” one in four admits, “Sometimes I bring inherent biases into new interactions with people I don’t know.” And while 70% of respondents globally say it’s important to speak up when you hear someone perpetuating harmful “-isms” no matter where you are, only 24% say they would definitely speak up if they feel uncomfortable with how a group of people is being spoken about or marketed to in their current workplace. 44% of respondents say “maybe.”

But diverse, inclusive, and supportive environments can change this inaction. Our data show that respondents who are happy at their job are more likely to speak up against harmful “-isms” in the workplace. And ultimately, there is a lack of diversity and inclusion in leadership that should be addressed. While 52% of our respondents globally say a diverse leadership is important for them, only 33% say it is offered at their company. On a personal level, 36% of respondents globally feel their career success is impacted negatively due to their inclusion in a marginalized group. In the U.S., that number rises to 41% for non-white Latinx or Hispanic women and 43% for Black women.

So how do we move people from saying “maybe” to saying “definitely”? How do we evolve our understandings of one another from stereotypes to more specific reflections of identity? How can companies drive conversation in both society and the workplace to break down stereotypes and reflect all the identities of women? In the words of one respondent: “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said that the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they show only one side of the story. So show more than one side of the story.”

About Refinery29

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