

Intersectionality

Reflections from the Gender & Development Network

Introduction

Intersectionality is increasingly referred to among feminists but frequently undefined, leaving the term open to a variety of interpretations: what it means in practice and how to put it to use is still unclear to many.¹ Here, the Gender & Development Network attempts a summary of the discussion in order to assist our members and colleagues to better define the concept and how to use it. There is a rich body of academic literature on the subject, but we have focused more on the practical implications, particularly relying on the work of women's rights network AWID, recognising that interaction with those experiencing intersecting discriminations will be vital to the process.²

The concept of intersectionality helps us to both understand and respond to complex and multifaceted identities – describing the way that inequalities and oppression manifest themselves, but also proposing the way in which programme interventions should be shaped, and political resistance can be built. It shows us how gender inequality and patriarchy intersect with other systems of oppression and how these intersections then contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege.³ And it highlights new forms of activism, advocacy and resistance. As a network, combatting patriarchy, gender inequality and the abuse of women's rights remains the primary focus of our political agenda – and our particular contribution to social justice movements. But we also recognise it cannot be understood and confronted in isolation from the myriad of other discriminations and forms of oppression that women face.

Essentially, an intersectional approach reminds us of three main points:

- First, that while all women are subject to gendered discrimination in one way or another, it is not just gender but also race, socioeconomic class and other factors which shape experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and oppression.
- Second, that the particular experience of intersecting discriminations is unique, not simply the sum of different discriminations.
- Third, that as a political movement, feminism must tackle all forms of discrimination and oppression whether based on gender, race, class, and so on.

The history

Feminists have long understood that gender inequality and the abuse of women's rights goes beyond individual discrimination. Instead we have identified that there is a *system of oppression* based on gender and assumptions of gender roles, behaviours and norms in society which we call *patriarchy*.

The term 'intersectionality' was originally coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a black US civil rights advocate and legal scholar. It was born out of her review of multiple employment discrimination-based lawsuits, in which black women's challenges would not neatly fit within legal categories of either racism or sexism – but rather were a combination of both.⁴ However, for more than a century before Crenshaw coined the term, African American feminists' experiences of 'simultaneous oppressions' or 'interlocking oppressions' helped explain their collective struggles against sexism, racism, slavery, segregation and class.

From the 1970s, socialist feminists have also connected the oppression of women to other oppressions in society, exposing the nexus between capitalism and patriarchy and, to a lesser extent, recognising the way sexism interacted with sexuality, race or colonial status. Ehrenreich, in her 1976 article, argued that socialist feminism was really too short a term for 'socialist internationalist antiracist, anti-heterosexualist feminism'.⁵

The problem

The majority of national mechanisms, INGO programming and advocacy and UN instruments—including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination—have all tended to broach issues of discrimination in isolation. While it is often acknowledged that women are not a homogeneous group, in practice this rarely goes further than a brief nod to diversity with phrases like "poor women are especially vulnerable" or "women of colour face particular discrimination"—failing to address problems that are unique to particular groups of women, and at a particular time and place.⁶

Within the women's movement, many women still feel that their particular experiences and priorities are not heard, and that their political agendas need to become part of the broader feminist agenda.⁷

What is intersectionality?

Complex and intersecting identities: Crenshaw argued that understanding identity requires us to see all of its facets as intertwined and co-constitutive—as *intersecting*—

rather than as separate and independent of each other.⁸ Or, as feminist writer Hankivsky later observed: “inequities ... are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences.”⁹ Moreover, these intersections are dynamic, changing over time. Since Crenshaw, the approach has been developed by others to include categories in addition to gender, class and race, including: skin colour, caste, age, ethnicity, colonial experience, language, ancestry, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, ability, culture and geographic location, as well as status as a migrant, indigenous person, transgender person, refugee or internally displaced person, or person living with HIV/AIDS, in conflict or under foreign occupation.

Substantively different experiences: As AWID observes, “something unique is produced at the intersection point of different types of discrimination”.¹⁰ An intersectional perspective means that we should not look at these constellations of identities and their various intersections as *adding up* to a cumulative burden of oppression, but rather as producing *substantively different* experiences of oppression—an experience that is more than the sum of its parts.¹¹

Tackling the structures of oppression: Thinking about and working in development with an intersectional lens means understanding that particular experiences of oppression come from many structures, processes and institutions interacting at once—and that resisting that oppression is also a multifaceted project that must be central to the work. According to AWID, intersectionality is thus not just a theory and methodology but also “a springboard for a social justice action agenda.”¹² Feminism as a political movement must embrace the idea that: “Just as there are no human rights without women’s rights, there are no human rights without indigenous peoples’ rights, the rights of the disabled, of people of colour, and of gays and lesbians, just to name a few.”¹³

How should intersectionality strengthen our work?

In practice, an intersectional approach helps assess how particular constellations of identities and social positions impact on access to rights and opportunities, and how policies, programmes, services and laws affect people in different, context-specific or even unexpected ways. Understanding different intersecting systems of oppression enables us to recognise the different experiences of women, and how gender inequality is shaped by these intersections.

It poses challenges to the ways that we do programming and advocacy work and the alliances that we build. The following are some key elements for deploying an intersectional approach.

Power analysis: Individual people can experience both privilege and oppression at the same time and in different ways. Our unique, intersectional constellations of identities and experiences inform our political agendas—and they can also help us to comprehend the “political choices that different groups of women make based on the power asymmetries that they experience.”¹⁴

Politicised and transformative: Rights-based approaches or social justice paradigms are central to intersectional approach to development. Intersectionality is “explicitly oriented towards transformation, building coalitions among different groups, and working towards social justice,” as Hankivsky writes.¹⁵

Building resistance: Seeing how various oppressions are interwoven is not enough; we need to use that knowledge to work towards building appropriate forms of resistance to those oppressions. That our various identities are inextricable is also key to understanding that various social struggles for rights and justice are also interdependent. Recognition of the different and intersecting forms of oppression opens opportunities for new alliances who share a common political interest, whether this be with the trade union movement, indigenous peoples or the LGBTI community.

Context: Intersectional analysis suggests that our understanding and tackling of discriminations should be linked to the wider social, political, economic and legal environment in which they appear. As Enarsson suggests: “Instead of using intersectionality merely as a way of understanding the impact of different social, political and economic identities on our gendered experiences, international organisations should build their understanding of how such differing experiences of gendered life give rise to differing political agendas.”¹⁶ Building programmes around socio-political processes – whether market fundamentalism, climate change, or migration, Enarsson writes, “has the potential to break rigid categorisations and open up for more relevant and holistic interventions.”¹⁷ Moreover, intersectionality works across time and space, recognising that identities and experiences are dynamic and changing. This requires us to trace problems back to their roots, find the structural and systemic oppressions that shape day-to-day life, and recognise the full picture, not just a snapshot.

Being reflexive: As advocates for gender equality and women’s rights, we must consider our own social positions, identities and relationships—and how these might shape our perspectives and the outcome of our analyses. Our own identities and motivations cannot be left at the door. Moreover, those of us with access to power must step back, sharing and facilitating that access with and for other women.

Women’s own experiences and knowledge: Using an intersectional lens, it is important not to assume the meaning of any one category in the lives of the people it affects; rather, we need to start by focusing on women’s knowledge and experience

through personal accounts and testimonies, disaggregated data and detailed case studies. An intersectional approach also recognises the diversity of forms of knowledge, as well as how power influences which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate. Time will need to be spent formulating context-specific solutions in collaboration with the people experiencing discriminations. These priorities should then also influence our advocacy work – in message but also in methods.

Change the funding model: In the context of contracting space and funding for gender work, intersectional approaches are complex, providing yet more impetus for core, rather than project-based, funding that can support longer-term and more transformative change. It also suggests challenges about who receives the funding available and the need for more reflexive approaches to funding relationships. INGOs will need to consider how they share the funding they receive, and how they fund others.

Ask questions: We will not all be experts in every area of oppression, but we can strive to ask the right questions. Some key questions for an intersectional approach might include:

- What forms of identity are critical organising principles for this community/region (in addition to gender, consider race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, sexual orientation and gender identity, age, caste, ability)
- Which women, girls, men and boys are most at risk of marginalisation and why?
- What social and economic programmes are available to different groups in the community, and do they promote or progress a transformative agenda for women's rights?
- Who does and does not have access or control over productive resources and why?
- Who has the lowest and the highest levels of public representation and why?
- What laws, policies and organisations limit opportunities of different groups?
- What opportunities facilitate the advancement of different groups?
- What initiatives would address the needs of marginalised or discriminated groups in society?
- What are the expressed needs and priorities of these marginalised groups?¹⁸

What challenges does intersectionality pose?

- Perhaps the first challenge is to move **beyond the theory**, and use an intersectional analysis to improve the effectiveness of work – to better reach, and promote the interests of, women experiencing discrimination and inequality in different contexts.
- An intersectional approach is intellectually demanding and requires a greater depth and breadth of analytical commitment over **time** than most agencies are used to, made all the more difficult in the context of contracting space and funding for gender work.
- **Fissures in the women’s movement**, although already present, could become more apparent as potential conflict of interest and power are exposed – requiring honesty and self-exploration to protect and strengthen the collective power that the women’s movement as a whole has built.
- At a time when gender equality and women’s rights have finally hit the international political agenda, the challenge is to bring in an intersectional approach, while also ensuring that we don’t lose a **focus on women’s rights**, gender equality and recognition of the existence of patriarchy.
- Particularly in the context of the leave no one behind (LNOB) agenda, misinterpretations of intersectionality could fuel an individualistic approach to injustice and discrimination, ignoring the **structural nature** of patriarchy and other systems of oppression. In an ever growing list of ‘categories’, core intersecting systems of oppression may be lost.
- **Technocriticism** of an approach that should be fundamentally political and based in power analysis is already apparent. Enarsson writes that “much like gender mainstreaming, intersectionality has been turned into a technical tool rather than the practical application of a radical political position.”¹⁹

¹ Hankivsky, O. 2014. *Intersectionality 101*. Burnaby, BC: Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, Simon Fraser University, pp. 1-2. http://vawforum-cwr.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/intersectionality_101.pdf

² <https://www.awid.org/>

³ AWID. 2004. *Intersectionality: a tool for gender and economic justice*, Women’s rights and economic change 9, p. 1. <https://www.awid.org/publications/intersectionality-tool-gender-and-economic-justice>

⁴ Crenshaw, K. 1989. ‘Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics’, *University of Chicago legal forum* 140: 139-167.

⁵ See particularly Barbara Ehrenreich’s 1976 article, *What is Socialist Feminism?* Reprinted in

<https://monthlyreview.org/2005/07/01/what-is-socialist-feminism> and also Holstrom, N in <https://monthlyreview.org/2003/03/01/the-socialist-feminist-project/>

⁶ Enarsson, J. 2015. *Re-politicising intersectionality*, Oxfam gender and intersectionality series, p. 5. https://policy-practice.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Repoliticising_Intersectionality_-_Enarsson__fmkAQFP.pdf

⁷ Enarsson, J 2015, 8

⁸ Crenshaw, K. 1989. 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago legal forum* 140: 139-167.

⁹ Hankivsky 2014, 2.

¹⁰ AWID 2004, 3.

¹¹ AWID 2004, 2.

¹² AWID 2004, 2.

¹³ AWID 2004, 3.

¹⁴ Enarsson 2015, 6.

¹⁵ Hankivsky 2014, 4.

¹⁶ Enarsson 2015, 4

¹⁷ Enarsson 2015, 7-8.

¹⁸ Questions drawn from AWID 2004, 7.

¹⁹ Enarsson 2015, 5.

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The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

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