

Intersectionality

1. The concept

The idea that an individual's identity cannot be captured in a single label is not a new one. However, the term “intersectionality” entered feminist discourse only in 1989, via a paper by feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw.¹ Crenshaw's analysis of race and gender as overlapping and intersecting systems of oppression drew from her personal experience of exclusion and marginalisation within both the women's movement and the civil rights movement, showing how Black women's locations at the intersections of race, class and gender shape their unique experiences of subordination.

Intersectionality is a conceptual lens that makes visible the ways in which women's lives and experiences are shaped not only by gender but by multiple systems of privilege - sexism, racism, classism, casteism, ableism, homophobia, ageism, religious bigotry - that intersect and interact with each other to create unique experiences of power/powerlessness and subordination/resistance.

Intersectional theory explains systems of oppression as not just overlapping, but as **mutually constitutive**, or shaped by each other. Intersectionality theorists have explored the mechanisms that build connections and synergies between systems of oppression, such as solidarity around a supposedly common cause as defined by dominant groups.

For instance, mainstream feminist constructions of women's oppression reflect the biases and experiences of the white/savarna², middle class, heterosexual women who claim “ownership” of these movements. Similarly, mainstream Dalit movements and civil rights movements reflect the biases of the men who dominate them. The inevitable consequence is the **exclusion** of those who do not match the **mythical norms** defined and enforced by dominant groups, resulting in the erasure of these excluded realities from the discourse. This exclusion and invisibility is compounded by the **internalisation of stereotypes** and **learned powerlessness** of those who are located at the intersections of multiple oppressions. Similarly, **disciplinary boundaries** in academia and the **limited interactions** between different issue-based movements

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1 Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140: 139–167.

2 'Savarna' (literally, “endowed with caste”) is a term that is used for non-Dalits.

and struggles on the ground makes it more difficult to identify the overlaps and intersections between different systems of oppression.

Black feminists, Dalit feminists and LGBTI feminists underline that the problem of exclusion cannot be solved merely by incorporating excluded groups into existing structures through measures such as quotas and affirmative action. Rather, it calls for a fundamental **dismantling and reconstruction** of theory, structure and practice. Intersectional approaches can open the space for these conversations, and can lead to strengthened solidarity and respect for difference.

Although initially resisted by many feminists as a divisive notion that would weaken the struggle against patriarchy, intersectionality is now an essential element of feminist theorising about identity, power, subordination and resistance. Intersectional concepts and approaches are being adapted, applied, tested and validated by feminists across the world.

2. Intersectionality in learning spaces

Intersectional theory is of relevance to learning facilitators who are concerned about creating learning spaces that are inclusive, affirming and safe for all participants. Some implications and possibilities are discussed below.



Making privilege visible. Privilege is usually invisible to those who have it. As one Black feminist puts it, “White women don't have to notice their whiteness each time they look in the mirror.” Similarly, caste is not an unavoidable marker of identity for *savarna* people as it is for Dalits; sexuality is not a make-or-break issue for straight people in the way that it is for queer people.



The inability or unwillingness of the privileged to acknowledge their own privilege is a major barrier to building solidarity across identities. Challenging or confronting people to “check your privilege” can create feelings of humiliation, anger and resentment that completely disrupt the learning process and polarise the space. On the other hand, limiting the discussion to the safe middle ground with statements like “women and men both suffer under patriarchy” or “racism dehumanises everyone” serves only to

demonstrate how power and privilege can be used for justifying and reinforcing the *status quo*.

In such situations, an intersectional approach can open the door for respectful conversations on power and privilege. The intersectional lens allows individuals to locate themselves at various points of intersection of different systems and hierarchies of power and privilege. It moves the

conversation away from assertions of personal belief (“I don’t hold with caste”, “I believe everyone is equal”) and helps in understanding that power and privilege are not choices, but are conferred by one’s location within social systems.

Decentering the conversation away from dominant voices. Intersectionality theory makes visible the uniqueness of individual experiences of oppression and subordination. A intersectional feminist praxis aimed at challenging multiple oppressions therefore calls for bringing hitherto silent or marginal voices to the centre of the conversation. The centrality of personal experience to theory-building - “personal is political” - is already enshrined as a principle of feminism. “Starting from the self” is also a foundational principle of Freirian practice. Thus, it is almost automatic for facilitators to ask women to speak about their experiences of domestic violence, or invite gay people to speak about experiences of homophobia. However, this approach has created some unintentional but ubiquitous patterns of silence. Bringing hitherto unheard voices into the conversation can be a powerful way to challenge exclusionary stereotypes and expose the connections between different systems of oppression. Decentering the conversation away from “the usual suspects” - for instance, by bringing the voices of disabled women into discussions of sexuality, or creating the space for single women and elderly men to speak about domestic violence - helps to turn the lens inwards and address exclusion and silencing within movements and organisations.

Three ways to practice intersectional feminism.

** Take care to step back when things aren’t about you.*

** Educate yourself on things that don’t affect you.*

** Pay attention when people speak to their experiences.*

<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/why-our-feminism-must-be-intersectional/>

Taking discussions on women’s equality out of the “gender box”. An intersectional approach can bring feminist politics into mainstream spaces such as the “gender workshops” organised by development agencies and NGOs, where patriarchal oppression is presented as the primary, if not exclusive, determinant of women’s status. This approach has contributed to pushing gender issues into an exclusive ghetto, segregated from other concerns and reduced to an afterthought in development discourse. An intersectional lens approach can demonstrate that gender equality demands a politics of liberation not just from sexism, but from all the interconnected systems of oppression that affect different women and men in different ways.

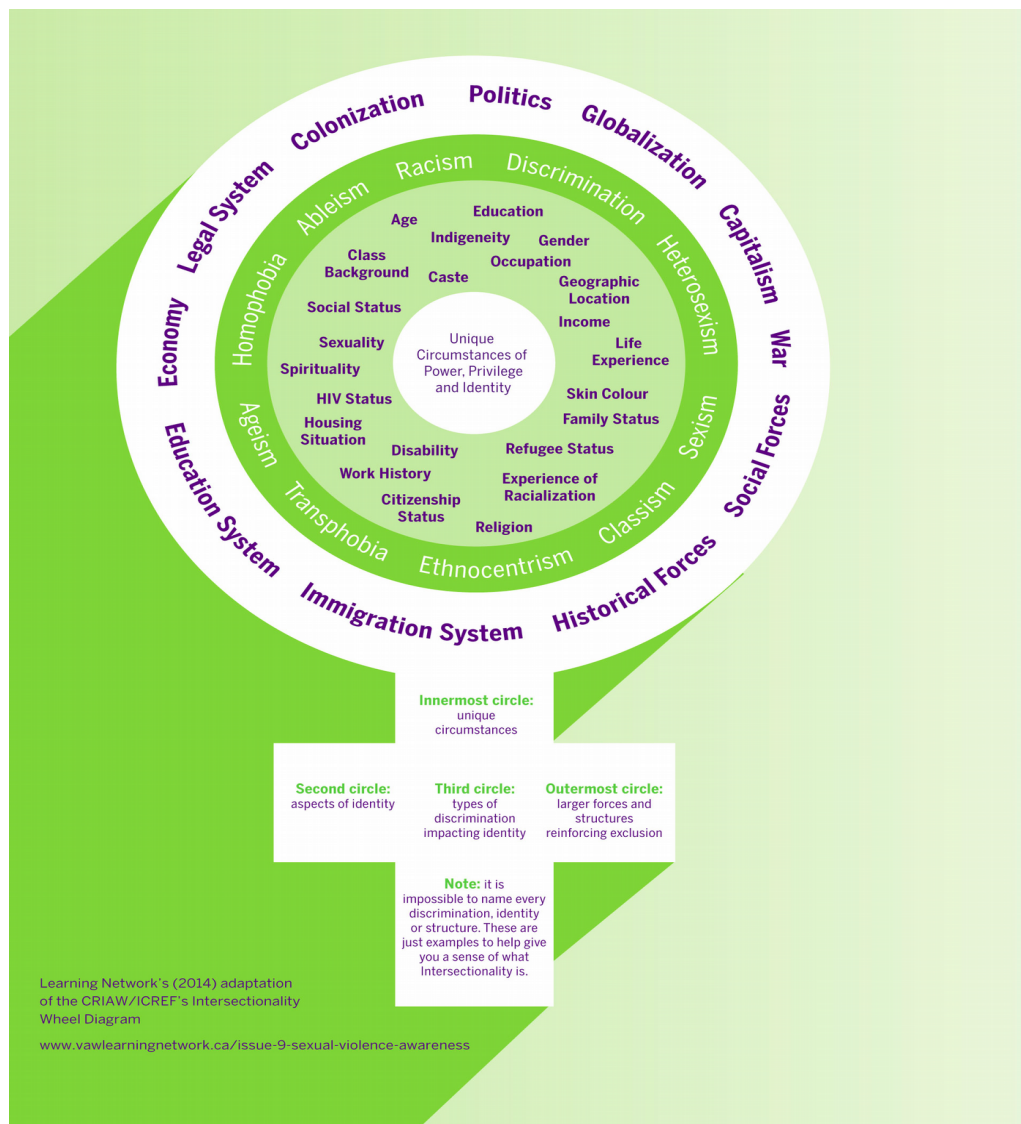
Some feminists are warning that intersectional approaches are leading to the creation of **new marginalities and divisive forms of identity politics**.³ While endorsing the need to bring personal experience to the centre of feminist theorising of oppression, they point out that a simplistic notion of identity as the sole basis for political action has contributed to the fragmentation of social movements, including women’s movements. This has particular resonance in learning contexts. A learning process that does not allow the voices of men to enter discussions on sexism (for instance by castigating every intervention by a man as “mansplaining”), or that debars white women from speaking in discussion on racism, is clearly one that violates the tenets of feminist learning. A discussion centred on individual voices and individual experiences is unlikely to enrich feminist politics unless it leads to a shared understanding of the underlying structures of oppression and the interlinkages between them. The challenge for the facilitator is to create an inclusive space for the emergence of this shared understanding and for its validation as a basis for collective action,

3 See for instance Rebecca Reilly-Cooper “Intersectionality and identity politics” <<https://rebeccarc.com/2013/04/15/intersectionality-and-identity-politics/>>

making the connection between the “personal” and the “political” and demonstrating the relevance of both intersectionality and feminism to struggles for equality and social justice.

3. Tools and exercises

The “**intersectionality wheel**”⁴ can be adapted and used to explain the concept and initiate discussions on intersectionality.



In many situations – such as when the group is very disparate in terms of location and experience, or where pre-existing internal hierarchies constrain some members from speaking out, it might not be possible to introduce the idea of intersectionality through discussions on personal experience. In

4 The “Intersectionality Wheel” has been developed by the Canadian Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children. <<http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/focus-areas/intersectionality>>

such situations, exercises such as the **“Power Line”** can be used to create “here-and-now” experiences of power and powerlessness and provide a safe and non-threatening space for exploring intersectionality and interlocking oppressions.

“Power Line” exercise: Note for facilitators

- *Create a set of profiles (as many as there are participants) using various permutations and combinations of "identity markers" such as sex, ethnicity, age, economic status, sexual preference, ability/disability, religion, race/caste and any others that may be relevant to the group (eg HIV status, educational qualifications, marital status). Write or print these profiles onto coloured cards. You need to do this in advance. Try to keep a few extra cards as back-up just in case.*
- *Put the cards face-down on the floor and ask each participant to choose one. Give people a few minutes to read their cards and "get into" the profile. They should not show their cards to each other at this stage. If there are any questions, people should come and ask the facilitator (not each other).*
- *When people are ready, ask them to line up in order of power/powerlessness - ie the most powerful person goes at one end of the line and the least powerful goes at the other end. Tell people to talk to each other and find out who is who before taking their positions. You should not intervene at all (except maybe to encourage someone who seems “out of it” for some reason).*
- *When the chaos has settled, ask the person at one end of the line to tell the group why they chose to stand in that spot. Then invite the rest of the group to validate or challenge the position taken by the person concerned. Let this discussion go on for a couple of minutes and step in only if it gets too heated or too long.*
- *When all the arguments have been presented, ask the concerned person if they want to change their position. There is no compulsion to move - they can choose to remain where they are if they are not convinced by the arguments given.*
- *Move down the line with each person explaining their stand and being challenged/questioned by the others. There should be lots of noise and movement.*
- *When everyone has "defended their position" ask everyone to take a look at the line and how it has re-arranged itself. Ask a couple of questions to get people talking on whether it mirrors the stereotypical perception of power and powerlessness (eg all women and all poor people at the powerless end). The discussion can go in any one or multiple ways - from how stereotypical notions of powerlessness drive many development programmes, to how powerlessness is sometimes "bestowed" by others and has little to do with self-perceptions; to definitions of power and powerlessness; to complex ideas of "victim power" and "weapons of the weak".*
- *Now present the group with a changed scenario. You will have to think of a scenario that is relevant to the context and to the individual participants - eg. criminalisation of homosexuality in the case of a group of HIV+ activists; or a natural disaster in the case of a group of development NGOs or government officials; a political takeover by the religious right in the case of a group of feminist activists and so on.*
- *Ask people to quickly move to new positions on the power/powerlessness line if they feel this is warranted by the changed situation.*
- *In debriefing the experience, you could focus on the notion of power hierarchies as changing and fluid, and could go on to a deeper exploration of the idea of intersectionality and its political, social and*

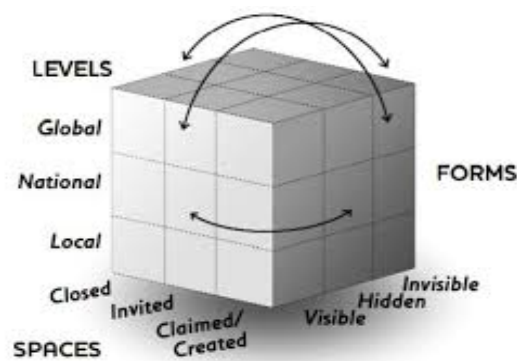
organisational implications. You can also get people to think about the pros and cons of identity politics, and how it might advance or hinder the goals of social transformation.

- You could also ask everyone how they feel at the end of the exercise. People usually have great insights on the ways in which their assumed identities influenced their behaviour during the exercise. It's sometimes useful to point out that people really get into their identities during Step 4 - it is when positions have to be defended or challenged that sleeping identities wake up and bare their teeth!

The really good thing about this exercise is that it is totally safe - it is entirely managed and controlled by participants - it goes only as deep as they would like it to, and in directions that they want to take it. Plus it's great fun to do – there is always a lot of laughter and playfulness.

The only risk is that sometimes a participant could draw a card that is too painfully close to their own reality - in such cases, some emotional support might be needed to deal with the dynamics. If you spot this happening at an early stage, use one of the back-up cards to deflect the possibility of hurting someone.

Analytical tools such as the “Power Cube”⁵ can be used to explore the dimensions of power within intersecting structures of oppression and identify possibilities for change and transformation. The Power Cube can be a useful way to move from discussions on power and privilege to acknowledging differences, identifying common ground and building relationships of feminist solidarity between differently positioned groups.



4. Readings and resources

- **AWID guide to intersectionality** <<http://www.awid.org/publications/intersectionality-tool-gender-and-economic-justice>>
- **“Making Change Happen: Concepts for revisioning power for justice, equality and peace.”** <<http://www.awid.org/publications/intersectionality-tool-gender-and-economic-justice>>
- **Everyday Feminism. “Why our feminism must be intersectional.”** <<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/why-our-feminism-must-be-intersectional/>>
- **Intersectionality wheel**
- **Power Cube Resource Collection** <<http://www.powercube.net/>>
- **Practical tools for intersectional workshops** <<http://www.oaith.ca/assets/files/Publications/Intersectionality/Practical-tools-intersectional-workshops.pdf>>

5 Gaventa, John. 2006. Finding the spaces for change: A power analysis. IDS Bulletin Volume 37 Number 6. November 2006. <http://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/finding_spaces_for_change.pdf>