



facts & issues

Intersectionality: A Tool for Gender and Economic Justice

Intersectionality is a tool for analysis, advocacy and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations and helps us understand how different sets of identities impact on access to rights and opportunities. This primer explains what intersectionality is, including its critical role in work for human rights and development, and suggests some different ways in which gender equality advocates can use it.

While the global economic integration of recent decades has produced immense wealth for some, these 'winners' are a privileged few. Embedded in colonial histories and exacerbated by modern fundamentalist ideologies, new technologies and contemporary forms of discrimination, **the policies and processes of neoliberal globalization are perpetuating racism, intolerance and discrimination against women.** They are justifying the exclusion of those who have been left behind by the global economy and aggravating poverty, inequality and human rights violations. Clearly, globalization and economic change are impacting on different people in different ways.

While all women are in some ways subject to gender discrimination, other factors including race and skin colour, caste, age, ethnicity,

language, ancestry, sexual orientation, religion, socio-economic class, ability, culture, geographic location, and status as a migrant, indigenous person, refugee, internally displaced person, child, or a person living with HIV/AIDS, in a conflict zone or under foreign occupation, combine to determine one's social location. **Intersectionality is an analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege.** It is therefore an indispensable methodology for development and human rights work.

What is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality is a feminist theory, a methodology for research, and a

The Canadian experience shows that in the market for rental housing, single, black women may have a particularly difficult time in finding apartments, especially if they are recipients of social assistance and/or single parents. Many landlords buy into various stereotypes and believe them to be less dependable tenants.

On the basis of sex alone, this discrimination would not be apparent. Similarly, if considering race alone, this discrimination would not be evident. Using standard discrimination analysis, courts would fail to see that there is discrimination against those who are single, black and female. It is the singular identity of *single-black-woman* which is the subject of discrimination in the housing market. This is intersectional discrimination.



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springboard for a social justice action agenda. It starts from the premise that **people live multiple, layered identities** derived from social relations, history and the operation of structures of power. People are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege (e.g. a woman may be a respected medical professional yet suffer domestic violence in her home).

Intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities. It aims to address the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women. It takes account of historical, social and political contexts and also recognizes unique individual experiences resulting from the coming together of different types of identity.

For example, the experience of a black woman in Cape Town is qualitatively different than that of a white or indigenous woman in that same location. Similarly, the experience of being lesbian, old, disabled, poor, Northern-based, and/or any number of other identities, are unique and distinct identities and experiences.

Intersectional analysis posits that we should *not* understand the combining of identities as additively increasing one's burden but instead as producing *substantively distinct experiences*. In other words, the aim is not to show that one group is more victimized or privileged than another, but to reveal meaningful distinctions and similarities in order to overcome discriminations and put the conditions in place for all people to fully enjoy their human rights.

As a consequence of their multiple identities, some women are pushed to the extreme margins and experience profound discriminations while others benefit from more privileged positions. Intersectional analysis helps us to visualize the convergence of different types of discrimination – as points of intersection or overlap. Moreover, **it helps us to understand and assess the impact of these converging identities on opportunities and access to rights, and to see how policies, programs, services and laws that impact on one aspect of our lives are inextricably linked to others.** For example, many female domestic workers experience sexual assault and abuse at the hands of their employers. It is the intersection of the worker's identities (e.g. female, poor, foreign citizen) that put her in the position of vulnerability. It is the intersection of the policies, programs and laws (e.g. employment policies, citizenship

Declaration, World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and related Intolerance (2001)

69. We are convinced that racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance reveal themselves in a differentiated manner for women and girls, and can be among the factors leading to a deterioration in their living conditions, poverty, violence, multiple forms of discrimination, and the limitation or denial of their human rights....

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, General Recommendation XXV Gender Related Dimensions of Racial Discrimination (2000)

1. The Committee notes that racial discrimination does not always affect women and men equally or in the same way. There are circumstances in which racial discrimination only or primarily affects women, or affects women in a different way, or to a different degree than men. Such racial discrimination will often escape detection if there is no explicit recognition or acknowledgement of the different life experiences of women and men, in areas of both public and private life.

laws, shelters for abused women) that support and maintain the vulnerability. Because the policies do not respond to the specific identities of domestic workers, they do not allow the women to enjoy their right to be free from violence.

As a theoretical paradigm, intersectionality allows us to understand oppression, privilege and human rights *globally*. It helps us to build arguments for substantive equality from women's histories and community case studies (that is, women writing/speaking from their experiences of specific, intersecting identities) by extracting theoretical statements and overarching principles. This allows us to see that **the claims women are making for their equal rights are not merely an instance of a self-interested group promoting its own interests, but instead fundamental to achieving the promise of human rights for all**. Intersectionality, therefore, is a tool for building a global culture of human rights from the grassroots to the global level.

Intersectional analysis is characterized by an analytical shift away from the dichotomous, binary thinking about power that is so common. Too often our frameworks conceptualize one person's rights as coming at the expense of another person's; development becomes about establishing and maintaining competitive advantage. In contrast, thinking about development from the perspective of intersectionality focuses attention on specific contexts, distinct experiences and the qualitative aspects of equality, discrimination and justice, permitting us to simultaneously work on behalf of ourselves and others. 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.

While intersectionality differs from some more prominent gender and development and diversity approaches, it is not new. As a formal theoretical

framework, intersectionality has been used for well over a decade; it emerged out of attempts to understand experiences of women of colour in the United States. More recently it has been taken up by feminists in the global South. As a fact of life, intersectionality has been there all along, in the ways that we live, interact and understand discrimination and equality. We are now, however, more often discussing intersectionality explicitly in the fields of development and human rights, using it as a tool for advocacy, program planning, and research.

Why Intersectionality?

Most gender analysis frameworks used by development actors focus solely on gender relations. While assertions that women are not a homogenous group are common, the implications of this observation seem to get quickly lost in the application. The tendency is to merely note that "poor women are especially impacted" and "racialized women have different experiences". As a result, certain experiences and issues are obscured or rendered invisible. Problems that are unique to particular groups of women or disproportionately affect some women may not receive appropriate or adequate redress.

Similarly, many legal approaches conceptualize each component of discrimination based on multiple grounds as compounding on the others, additively increasing the overall burden of inequality. Such approaches do not recognize that **something unique is produced at the intersection point of different types of discrimination**. Claims "fall through the cracks" when the full context and quality of the experience of discrimination are not considered.

We need tools such as intersectionality to counteract these trends and lay bare the full complexity and specificity of women's rights and development issues, including the structural and dynamic dimensions of the interplay of different policies and institutions.



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Consider this...

Trafficking of women and girls is often viewed too narrowly. Women and girls enter trafficking networks because of racial, social and economic marginalization which renders them more vulnerable to racial, sexual and descent-based discriminatory treatment. Racial discrimination may also determine the treatment that trafficked women experience in destination countries. Traffickers target specific groups of women; gender considerations alone do not accurately describe the problem or lead to effective responses. Sex workers in Amsterdam, for example, have organized and won many rights of protection. In reality however, these rights are primarily enjoyed by white, native-Dutch sex workers.

Women are sometimes excluded from jobs deemed more appropriate for men because of their sex, and women may be excluded from jobs considered 'women's jobs' because of their race. As a result, women of ethnic minorities are specifically excluded from employment opportunities. They may have few avenues to challenge this discrimination because they could not necessarily bring a claim on the basis of either sex discrimination or racial discrimination.

African-American women are subjected to racial discrimination in the U.S.A. A middle class African-American university professor, however, does not experience the same discrimination as a poor African-American woman who works as a cleaner in a non-unionized hotel.

A young Dalit girl is assaulted at a bus stop on her way to school in India. The initial reaction is to demand that the

Furthermore, we need such a theoretical framework to **identify practices that fit into patterns of discrimination and distinguish these from things that are idiosyncratic about the actor or community** (e.g. as the opening example shows, the challenges faced by single black women in finding housing result from systematic discrimination by Canadian landlords).

"... it is not about making sure that every oppression is named; it is actually about making sure every person is accounted for."

Younna Chlala, WILD for Human Rights

Intersectionality also has particular value in terms of overcoming historically based conceptual gaps. For example, within the United Nations system, race and gender-based discrimination have thus far been considered under discrete mechanisms developed along separate but parallel tracks (i.e. mechanisms of the Conventions on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and all Forms of Discrimination Against Women). Similar splits are evident in national-level mechanisms and NGO programming. **Such single category descriptions, however, do not reflect the reality that we all have multiple identities and therefore may face intersectional discrimination.** An intersectional approach, in contrast, does not require a person to slot themselves into a rigid category in order to seek redress. Although many current laws and human rights conventions have been interpreted narrowly to only capture a single form of discrimination at one time, these interpretations contravene the explicit intentions of instruments intended to protect against discrimination.¹ Building a truly effective human rights system requires addressing the shortcomings of past frameworks and developing more contextualized interpretations of equality provisions.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of our work depends on analyses that can capture complex, interwoven issues. **If our baseline analysis and project planning do not begin with a complete picture of the economic, social, political and cultural situation, then our interventions and programs cannot possibly achieve their full potential.** Moreover, what works to advance the rights of some women may not be effectual for more marginalized women. Intersectional subordination is by its nature obscured; it occurs at the margins in complex circumstances. If our analytical methodologies are categorical and top-down, they are unlikely to discover the full-range of vulnerabilities, activities and experiences of diverse women.

Finally, intersectionality is a **useful strategy for linking the grounds of discrimination (e.g. race, gender, etc.) to the social, economic, political and legal environment that contributes to discrimination and structures experiences of oppression and privilege.** The rich descriptions produced through intersectional

“Why is it that for us, gender is the only construct that we can understand and accept in our work yet we expect everyone else to incorporate gender into theirs?”

Mallika Dutt, AWID Forum
“Reinventing Globalization”
Guadalajara, Mexico, October 2002

analyses illuminate the actors, institutions, policies and norms that intertwine to create a given situation. Such textured analyses are critical to our ability to effect progressive change in the face of the fundamentalist forces, neoliberal economic policies, militarization, new technologies, entrenched patriarchy and colonialism, and new imperialism that threaten women’s rights and sustainable development today.

How to 'do' Intersectionality

How we think determines what we do and how we do it. First and foremost, **using intersectionality in our work requires that we think differently about identity, equality and power.** It requires that we focus on points of intersection, complexity, dynamic processes, and the structures that define our access to rights and opportunities, rather than on defined categories or isolated issue areas. Analytically, it requires that we see the eradication of discrimination and the celebration of diversity as fundamental to development and the enjoyment of human rights. It requires a substantial investment in the analytical stages of the work; the intellectual demands of intersectional analysis are indeed higher than many other approaches to gender.

Secondly, **using intersectionality entails valuing a ‘bottom-up’ approach to research, analysis and planning.** Information gathering should begin by asking questions about how women and men actually live their lives. The picture can then be built ‘upwards,’ accounting for the various influences that shape women’s lives. Specific inquiries need to be made about the experiences of women living at the margins, the poorest of the poor, and women suffering from different types of oppression.² We need both personal accounts and testimonies, and also data disaggregated according to race, sex, ethnicity, caste, age, citizenship status and other identities. The analysis should aim to reveal how practices and policies shape the lives of those impacted, as compared to the lives of those not subject to similar influences.

police provide better security on the road. Community consultations in combination with statistical and contextual analysis reveal that more than a security issue, this is an issue of discrimination against Dalit girls and women. The range of remedies could therefore range from reserved places in schools and with employers for Dalit women and girls, to public awareness campaigns on the prohibition on untouchability, public condemnation of those who promote caste-based violence, and official recognition of Dalit women as a discriminated-against group in need of special protection.

In circumstances where immigrants constitute a large percentage of the poor or where indigenous populations have disproportionately high levels of unemployment, the mainstream media, policy makers and the general public may accuse immigrants and indigenous people of being less capable or personally deficient. They disregard the fact that social structures and policies prevent them from accessing rights and resources to the same extent that others in the society can and that they are discriminated against.

In designing programs for refugee camp residents displaced by war, a gender specific approach alone would never suffice. We would want to understand needs, vulnerabilities and priorities of many identities – for example, of the young and old, persecuted ethnic groups, families with multiple dependents, and those who have experienced personal or psychological trauma. We would want to understand how gender intersects with these other identities to structure the experiences of the residents of the camp in order to design effective programs for them.

* These examples are adapted from the sources listed at the end of this publication.



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So for example, an analysis of poverty would not stop at finding that women are disproportionately poor in a given region, but would explore which groups of women are poorest, which policies and practices contribute to their poverty, how the historical and political situation contributes, and whether development projects and policy initiatives are addressing the specific problems faced by different groups of women.

"An intersectional analysis tells us that it is not enough to belong to a rich country – that alone does not protect you from vulnerability to HIV infection, nor does it guarantee treatment. Where you sit in relation to the State – as a woman, a poor woman, a black woman, an educated woman, as a lesbian, as a woman with a disability who is therefore assumed not to be having sex, as an immigrant who is not entitled to many of the social security benefits of citizens,... all of these factors determine your vulnerability to HIV/AIDS."

Sisonke Msimang, AWID Forum "Reinventing Globalization"
Guadalajara, Mexico, October 2002

For an intersectional analysis to be useful in the field of development, it must be informed by the experiences and views of women of the full diversity of identities, including women in the global South and also women of colour and immigrant women in the global North. The 'subjects' of development work should be at the table (not the foreign 'experts') and involved in developing the analysis and the interventions. Similarly, the voices of theorists and analysts from the global South need to be amplified and respected.

Using Intersectionality to Advance Women's Rights and Gender Equality

Eradicating poverty is not purely an economic struggle. Likewise, ending human rights violations and bringing about sustainable development requires ideological and

cultural shifts as much as technically sound programming and stable financing. The complexity of the challenges posed by trade liberalization, deregulation, privatization, and intensified imperialism demand analyses that simultaneously provide detailed, nuanced information and inspire activism and advocacy for equality and justice. Intersectionality is one such tool.

As with all approaches and tools, the usefulness and impact of intersectionality will depend on how it is used. If institutionalized and simplified, its value could be lost as has happened with many other progressive gender analysis tools. Moreover, if the analysis is misapplied, it could produce an ineffective postmodern rubric of individuality. If used within a social justice paradigm however, intersectionality can be extremely useful and empowering.

How one uses intersectionality necessarily depends upon one's positions, objectives and needs. Here are a few possibilities:

- In compiling data sets and statistics about the impacts of economic policies on women, ask specifically about the experiences of those from different ethnic groups, migrants, poor women, and women of other identified groups.

"Today our challenge to ourselves and the women's movement must be to render the complexities of intersecting discriminations plain enough to see and intervene in so that marginalized women are included not only in how we talk about effecting change but are also involved as participants in the actions to which we commit ourselves in future directions of the women's movement."

Marsha Darling, AWID Forum "Reinventing Globalization"
Guadalajara, Mexico, October 2002

■ When setting priorities for projects, allocate resources to those who are most marginalized as revealed by analyzing intersecting discriminations. Empowering those who have the least access to rights and resources and focusing on processes that lead to poverty and exclusion (e.g. by providing basic medical services and educational opportunities, protecting their livelihood security, or supplying appropriate agricultural technologies and inputs) may effect the greatest tangible advances in terms of women's rights and gender equality. To do this, start and carry on your work by asking these key questions:

- What forms of identity are critical organizing principles for this community/region (beyond gender, consider race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, age, caste, ability)?
- Who are the most marginalized women, girls, men and boys in the community and why?
- What social and economic programs are available to different groups in the community?
- Who does and does not have access or control over productive resources and why?
- Which groups have the lowest and the highest levels of public representation and why?
- What laws, policies and organizational practices limit opportunities of different groups?
- What opportunities facilitate the advancement of different groups?
- What initiatives would address the needs of the most marginalized or discriminated groups in society?

The Association for Women's Rights in Development is an international membership organization connecting, informing and mobilizing people and organizations committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. A dynamic network of women and men, AWID members are researchers, academics, students, educators, activists, business people, policy-makers, development practitioners, funders and others, half of whom are located in the global South and Eastern Europe.

AWID's goal is to cause policy, institutional and individual change that will improve the lives of women and girls everywhere. Since 1982, AWID has been doing this by facilitating on-going debates on fundamental and provocative issues as well as by building the individual and organizational capacities of those working for women's empowerment.

215 Spadina Ave., Suite 150, Toronto,
ON, Canada, M5T 2C7

T: +1 (416) 594-3773

F: +1 (416) 594-0330

E-mail: awid@awid.org

Web: www.awid.org

Written by: Alison Symington

Copy-edit: Carly Zwarenstein

Design: Lina Gomez

Endnotes:

¹ K. Crenshaw, *The Intersectionality of Race and Gender Discrimination*, (unpublished, November 2002), page 13. [An earlier version of this paper was presented as the background paper for the Expert Group Meeting on Gender and Race discrimination held in Zagreb, Croatia November 21-24, 2000].

² *Ibid.*, page 14.

³ J. Kerr, "From 'Opposing' to 'Proposing': Finding Proactive Global Strategies for Feminist Futures" in J. Kerr, E. Sprenger and A. Symington (eds.), *The Future of Women's Rights: Global Visions and Strategies* (London: Zed Books), forthcoming in 2004.

- Advocate for ‘multiple grounds of discrimination’ clauses in national constitutions and in United Nations treaty mechanisms in order to open up space for courts and committees to fully address the unique discrimination faced by women living at the intersection of several identities. Remedying the discrimination requires understanding its origins.
- Respecting our diverse identities and privileges as women allows us to build our power as a movement based on our strengths and diversity. This entails ensuring that women of all identities have a space and voice to determine our agendas. Similarly, it suggests that we can use our privilege in strategic ways. Identity is a relative concept; at any given time we are operating from some position of power, whether it is our experience, ability, class, race, age or sexuality. We can work towards holistic and powerful solutions from the places where our relative privileges intersect.³

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WILD for Human Rights, a San Francisco-based NGO, offers training and resources on processes for applying intersectional human rights frameworks. Contact them at info@wildforhumanrights.org or by telephone at (+1) (415) 355-4744 for more information.



Association for Women’s Rights in Development
L’Association pour les droits de la femme et le développement
Asociación para los Derechos de la Mujer y el Desarrollo

215 Spadina Avenue, Suite 150
Toronto, Ontario
CANADA, M5T 2C7
T: (+1) 416-594-3773
F: (+1) 416-594-0330
E: awid@awid.org

<http://www.awid.org>