



OXFAM INTERSECTIONALITY SERIES

RE-POLITICISING INTERSECTIONALITY

HOW AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE CAN HELP
INGOS BE BETTER ALLIES TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS
MOVEMENTS

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COVER: *A demonstration on the Boulevard of Heroes in San Salvador; part of the Campaign for the Prevention of Gender Violence, "Entre Vos y Yo... Una Vida Diferente" ("Between You and Me, a Different Life"). Photographer: Jeff Deutsch*

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FOREWORD

On March 23-24, 2015, representatives from Oxfam affiliates and partners assembled on the Simmons College campus in Boston, Massachusetts. In a rare opportunity, gender experts and development practitioners donned their student hats to deep-dive into the topic of Intersectionality, an area of academic thought and feminist theory that is evolving into an ever-growing body of development discourse. The event was co-sponsored by Oxfam America, Oxfam Novib, and Oxfam Intermon, in close partnership with the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management.

Not just a learning space, the Symposium was also a conduit for the generation of knowledge. The centerpiece of discussions was a series of practice papers, authored by Oxfam staff and partners, which explore the issue of Gender and Intersectionality within the broader context of international development work. The intention is to share Oxfam's experience in Gender and Intersectionality with a wide audience in hopes of fostering thoughtful debate and discussion.

Oxfam America extends special thanks to all staff and partners who participated in the Symposium and who shared their expertise through these practice papers. We acknowledge the contribution of the advisory and planning committees, particularly of Sandra Sotelo Reyes (Intermon), Carmen Reinoso (Novib), Muthoni Muriu (Oxfam America), Patricia Deyton (CGO), Alivelu Ramisetty (Oxfam America), Maria Ezpeleta (Oxfam America), Eloisa Devietti (Oxfam America) and Lauren Walleser (CGO). We also recognize the support of Caroline Sweetman and Liz Cooke (Oxfam Great Britain) who made possible the publication of a special virtual issue of *Gender & Development, Intersecting Inequalities*, (<http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/bes/cgde-vsi-intersectionality>). Finally, we thank Irene Munoz (Oxfam International) and Aileen Charleston (Oxfam America) for their collaboration on communications.

Intersectionality is a feminist theory and analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. The experiences of marginalization and privilege are not only defined by gender, but by other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few – all of which are determined, shaped by, and imbedded in social systems of power.

INTERSECTIONALITY PRACTICE PAPERS SERIES

- *Active Citizenship of Women and Youth in Nicaragua*, Damarius Ruiz and Carolina Egio Artal (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Building Gender-Sensitive Resilience through Women’s Economic Empowerment: Lessons learned from pastoralist women in Ethiopia*, Imma Guixe (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Re-politicizing Intersectionality: How an intersectional perspective can help INGOs be better allies to women’s rights movements*, Jenny Enarsson (Oxfam Great Britain)
- *Women’s Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence: Links and lessons for Practitioners working with intersectional approaches*, Mara Bolis (Oxfam America), Christine Hughes (Oxfam Canada), Rebecca Fries (Value for Women), and Stephanie Finigan (Prosperity Catalyst)
- *“Your struggle is my struggle”: Integrating intersectionality in work with lesbian women, bisexual women and trans-women in Zimbabwe*, Sian Maseko (Oxfam Zimbabwe) and Sammantha Ndlovu (Sexual Rights Centre)

All papers are available as downloadable PDFs on our websites, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/> and <http://policy-practice.oxfamamerica.org/>, and may be distributed and cited with proper attribution.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the international development sector can become a better ally to women's rights movements by changing its approach to intersectionality. 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. Focusing on this political dimension of intersectionality helps bring the concept back to its radical roots and can guide international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to give meaningful support to movements as they challenge power.

FINDINGS

From subversive politics to a technical tool

Twenty-five years after it was coined, the concept of intersectionality is a staple in the international development sector. It is now widely accepted that in addition to gender, identities such as those related to socio-economic class, ethnicity, sexual preferences, age, physical ability, etc., shape our experience of discrimination and oppression; and the understanding that not all women experience the same kind or the same amount of discrimination has improved gender justice work significantly.

But somewhere along the line, the idea of intersectionality has become depoliticised and its subversive potential is often played down or even distorted. Much like gender mainstreaming, intersectionality has been turned into a technical tool rather than the practical application of a radical political position. Even if at the moment of doing gender analysis we remind ourselves of the other analytical categories that also impact on the gendered experience, too often we do not take this to its logical consequence when designing programmes. Consequently, we end up acknowledging that there are many different experiences of discrimination and oppression, but rather than adjusting our ways of working accordingly, we often proceed to programme along the same lines as always.

As a result, many gender practitioners in the development sector use intersectionality analysis simply as a way of capturing and understanding the full weight of oppression and discrimination that different individuals and groups are subjected to. This is an important step towards a richer understanding of the lives of the people and communities that we work for. However, simply adding one layer or form of discrimination on top of another in an accumulative way is not the point of an intersectional perspective.

Reclaiming the political roots of the concept

When law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in the late 1980s, it was intended as an instrument for analysing the ways in which different forms of social inequality, oppression, and discrimination interact and overlap in multidimensional ways. Importantly, she – and others who helped develop the concept in the following years¹ – made a clear distinction between structural and political intersectionality. While structural intersectionality describes the ways in which multiple interwoven inequalities impact on people; political intersectionality refers to how such interwoven inequalities are relevant to people’s political strategies.²

There is an urgent need for the international development sector to change its approach to intersectionality. It is necessary to shift focus from the structural only, to include a strong focus on political intersectionality. This will help the sector better understand not only women’s *burden of discrimination* but their *political agendas* too. In other words, it can help us understand the political choices that different groups of women make based on the power asymmetries that they experience. Repoliticising intersectionality and reclaiming its potential to challenge prevailing norms and power hierarchies in this way can help INGOs be better allies to women’s rights movements. I will use two concrete examples to illustrate different ways in which intersectionality challenges both the international development sector and the women’s rights movements, and suggest ways to overcome this. The first example comes from a woman human rights defender’s questioning of the INGO mindset and ways of working.

“Our lives are not compartmentalised”

“We went to [INGO] and told them that we need to add an economic component to this project if the women are going to be able to afford to participate. They said:

¹ such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and many others

² Lykke, Nina: Nya perspektiv på intersektionalitet. Problem och möjligheter, in Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift No 2-3, 2005.

‘We can’t do that. You’re not our livelihoods partner, you’re our partner on political participation.’

We couldn’t believe it. That division is something that the development sector invented.

Our lives are not compartmentalised like that. Our rights are not compartmentalised!”

Nicaraguan Woman Human Rights Defender, personal conversation

The situation described in the quote is not unique. Although the concept of intersectionality has been discussed in the development sector for decades, it often seems to stay in the theoretical sphere. We use it when we do gender analysis in order to better understand the reality of the groups we work for. But when it comes to programming, many times we do not seem to translate that understanding into initiatives that address the reality that the concept describes. Instead, we continue to artificially isolate different aspects of people’s lived realities along thematic lines that suit our own organisational structure and the logic of our institutional donors: economic empowerment, political participation, gender-based violence, etc.

It is true that international organisations need to organise their work one way or another, and that it is incredibly difficult to capture the complexity of reality in what are often (too) short-term projects with restrictive conditions from back donors. But going back to Crenshaw’s initial thinking on intersectionality can help us think differently about this. She states that “the failure to embrace the complexities of compoundedness is not simply a matter of political will, but is also due to the influence of a way of thinking about discrimination which structures politics so that struggles are categorized as singular issues. Moreover, this structure imports a descriptive and normative view of society that reinforces the status quo.”³ There is no reason why thematic (economic, political, violence, etc.) fault lines should be the most effective way to organise our work.

For example, when INGOs choose instead to build programmes around socio-political processes that impact on all (or many) aspects of people’s lives, this has the potential to break rigid categorisations and open up for more relevant and

³ Crenshaw, Kimberlé, 1989: Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, in *Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, p 166

holistic interventions. Examples of such interventions might be to support women's response to militarism, market fundamentalism, socio-economic inequalities, sectarianism, climate change, migration or socio-political fragility. Processes like these impact on multiple aspects of people's lives and encompass the economic, the political, issues of violence, etc.

Another way for INGOs to be more effective is to support agendas and movements rather than projects. Providing core funding to women's rights organisations means they can design interventions that address real and topical needs and interests of their constituencies.

Both of the above actions require influencing the analysis and strategies of donors and governments, in order to make possible more flexible and sustainable funding streams for this type of programming. This can be done through INGOs and women's rights organizations (WROs) jointly building evidence and testimonies of how funding modalities do not reflect the reality of women's lives and proposing alternative funding paradigms. INGOs can then facilitate spaces where WROs can share such evidence directly with donors and governments and take forward a dialogue about the kind of funding that would truly help advance their work.

The second example comes from a challenge to the women's rights movement – from within the movement itself.

“We're not here as folklore, we have a political agenda!”

The practical implementation and consequences of an intersectional perspective are not just a challenge for international organisations. Many social justice movements – including women's rights movements – also find themselves having to change their approach in order to address intersectionality in a meaningful way, internally as well as externally. The following example speaks to this, and to the importance of focusing not just on structural but political intersectionality.

The Latin American Feminist Encounters started in the early 1980s and bring together feminists from across Latin America and the Caribbean every three years. The 2009 Encounter in Mexico City was the first time when there was a

significant number of young women present. Many of the adult and older feminists commented positively on this in their interventions during the event, welcoming what they described as a renewal of the feminist movement in the region. However on the third day, some of the young women themselves took the microphone for the first time, and their comments were not as celebratory:

“Everyone is saying that it’s great that we’re here and that they’re so glad to see us. But you’re not listening to what we have to say! You’re not bringing our issues into the debate. We’re not here as folklore! We’re not here to make the movement look more diverse. We have issues that we want to discuss, and they’re different from the issues that you want to discuss. We have our own political agenda, and it needs to become part of your agenda.”

When I spoke with these young feminists after their intervention, they emphasised how much they owe to the feminists who went before them and paved the way for them to exercise their rights, but they also gave several examples of how their perspective and their agenda is different from that of older feminists. For instance, they stressed that the Latin America that they are growing up in is different from the Latin America that adult feminists grew up in. The issues facing a 20-year-old today are not the same as those facing a 20-year-old two or three decades ago. *“They grew up in military dictatorships. We’re growing up in the democracies that they helped bring about, in a mass media and internet era that was unimaginable back then. It makes a huge difference. They fought to remove the stigma from young people’s sexuality; we’re developing our sexuality in a climate where sexual imagery is everywhere all the time telling us how to look and act.”* They also pointed out that young people and adults living on the same continent and in the same country experience very different realities at any given point in time. For example, the exclusion of young people from many spheres of political and economic life has gender specific implications and impacts on gender relations, and addressing this is a burning issue for young feminists. *“We are not just younger versions of the adult feminists – we have our own issues and perspectives, and that means that we have our own political agenda, too.”*

The position put forward by these women perfectly illustrates why we need to take into account not only structural but also political intersectionality. While structural intersectionality is about the ways in which asymmetries of power are interwoven; political intersectionality shows how resistance to those power asymmetries must also build on multiple principles in order to be effective. The way in which we fight against oppression needs to be informed by our reality in all its complexity. The message that the young feminists were conveying to the crowd at the Mexico City conference was that their lived reality is not just one that sets their *experience* apart from others in the women's rights movement; it is also the foundation and motor of their *political agenda*.

So what does this mean for INGOs? How can international organisations support women's rights movements in their efforts to ensure that their agendas are more strategic, inclusive and representative?

Much has been made of the differences of opinion within the feminist and women's rights movements. While such differences are in fact (and have always been) present in all social movements, stereotypes about women not being able to get along are regularly used to paint this as a problem specific to women's organisations. INGOs can choose to understand such differences not as a weakness or risk, but as the constant renegotiation of vantage points and strategy and as an expression of diversity.⁴ It is important that INGOs do not treat movements as homogenous groups, thereby silencing and making invisible different intra-movement positions and agendas. Instead, supporting movements to explore tensions and conflicts can help them build a stronger platform for their struggle.

INGOs should also facilitate links between different movements – for example between youth movements and women's movements – in ways that do not reproduce subordination or power relations that may exist or be perceived to exist between them.

⁴ For the past few years the Young Feminist Activism programme of AWID (Association of Women in Development) has been facilitating conversations on how to strengthen organising across generations in women's movements. Among the lessons coming out of this process is the importance of valuing the complementarity of different experiences, perspectives and skills.

CONCLUSION

Supporting movements to challenge power

Focusing on the political as well as the structural dimension of intersectionality can bring the concept back to its radical roots. INGOs should use an intersectional perspective not just to “quantify” the structural discrimination that different groups are subjected to but to understand how that discrimination shapes their political action – and ultimately, how INGOs can support such action. Political intersectionality can also help centre development programming around the agency of women and their organisations. Rather than being seen primarily as people who are subjected to structural oppression, it helps INGOs recognise them as people who make active decisions about how to fight discrimination that they face. When applied in this way, an intersectional perspective can help INGOs become better allies to women’s rights movements as they challenge power.



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