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Intersectionality

Older than most of us think and runs from feminism, to politics and civic activism, to anti-racist struggles under different names.

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Introduction

Intersectionality is older than most of us think and runs from feminism, to politics and civic activism, to anti-racist struggles under different names.

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Image source: Teaching Tolerance. 2016. Intersectionality 101. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE . Accessed on 21 June 2019.

What remains common throughout the years, continents and practitioners is the understanding of how certain bodies become the subjects of multiple discrimination because of the way cultural norms, embedded and replicated by systems of power, are translated or not translated in policies. Therefore social justice is not achieved and entire communities and individuals are left with no recourse to justice or redistributive/reparation mechanisms in our societies.

What intersectionality helps discarding, in every one of its iterations and manifestations through time and spaces, is the binary hierarchical exclusionary understanding of our worlds.

> “One core premise of intersectionality concerns the relationships between ideas, practices […]. This entailed working through and across many differences.”1

Intersectionality is applied and part of Savitribai Phule’s (1831−1897) feminist understanding of the social injustice of colonial India, where she named in her analysis not one cause, one root, but focused on and named several axes of social division, from caste to gender to economic status to religion.

We find intersectionality more consistently named during the social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, when African-American, Chicana and Latina women activists together with Native American and Asian-American women “confronted the puzzle of how their needs simply fell through the cracks of anti-racist social movements, feminism, and unions organizing for workers' rights.”2

It was Kimberlé Crenshaw, in the late 1980s, who succeeded in making intersectionality a recognised, acclaimed, global foundational framework. Thanks to her, it became the analytical

“meme” of both academic and political discourse, bridging worlds that are often unreachable silos to one another.

Crenshaw first coined the term in 1989 because she felt that anti-racist and feminist movements, where she was a theoretician and activist, were both overlooking the unique challenges faced by Black American women. The term has its roots in the Black feminist movement and it has become an essential analytical tool in feminist theorising.

As Crenshaw noted in her keynote speech at the Women of the World (WOW) Forum in 2016:

> “Intersectionality is not primarily about identity. It's about how structures make certain identities the consequence of, the vehicle for vulnerability. So if you want to know how many intersections matter, you've got to look at the context. What's happening? What kind of discrimination is going on? What are the policies? What are the institutional structures that play a role in contributing to the exclusion of some people and not others?”[3]

Understanding intersectionality

Our understanding of intersectionality is needed because it is important not only to understand the “what” of discrimination but its complexities and “why” it takes place.

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Image source: Teaching Tolerance. 2016. Intersectionality 101. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE . Accessed on 21 June 2019.

For example, Crenshaw stated that legislation about race was framed to protect Black men while legislation about sexism was understood to protect white women, and there were no provisions able to respond to the needs of subjects who were at the same time Black and women.

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Image source: Teaching Tolerance. 2016. Intersectionality 101. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE . Accessed on 21 June 2019.

Now that intersectionality has become this inescapable magic buzzword, is important to recognise the fact that there are multiple narratives and that it can be useful to look at it through an enriched lens, such as the one suggested by Patricia Hills Collins and Silma Bilge:

> “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.”

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Patricia Hills Collins and Silma Bilge, intersectionality's six key elements: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity and social justice.

Intersectionality and sexuality

How would intersectionality work if we apply it to sexuality?

Sexuality, sexual orientation, gender expression: all these terms already bring us to a complex, fluid relational system. To talk of one's sexuality is to enter an intersection of self and projected embodied realities.

As activists, feminists, human rights and sexual rights activists we are interested in more than a descriptive inclusive exercise of the complexities of the world. We want change. We aim at a big structural change, which is social justice.

It is this tension between the understanding of sexuality as a right and the achievement of social justice that recognises this right in full that intersectionality displays its capacity to hold the complexity, point at the lack of responses, articulate the demands and formalise them as policy or governance asks.

To use intersectionality using sexuality as an entry point means to address the complexity of our identities, move away from the minorities framework of representation politics, explode and expand the understanding of identities to their structural belonging/referencing to other elements of identities such as class, age, ability, race, caste, not to build a hierarchical system of discrimination but to denounce and make visible how power in its various social dimensions from cultural, to interpersonal, to structural is reflected and results in systematic access to privileges or in systematic discrimination.

Sexuality, as one of humans' central dimensions, can only benefit from an intersectional lens that, paraphrasing Simla Bilge[1], refuses to separate "questions of gender, sexuality and queerness, from any other questions."

> To use a feminist intersectional lens means to acknowledge the complexity in which people, in relation to one another and the system(s), experience the power of social inequality in their specific social context and use this acknowledgment/evidence to achieve social justice.

It means to put at the centre the lived experiences and struggles of people, and to have critical conversations that unpack and address rights violations and discrimination suffered by people because of the way their sexualities and genders are defined by themselves or are given/passed down by society.

Many of us who work on sexuality issues have met lesbian women who come from an upper-class background and who have faced different forms of discrimination but with lesser severity because of their perceived social status.

Some people tend to think that applying an intersectional analysis or lens to the different forms of discrimination and human rights violations faced by a person is to compare or judge the severity of that discrimination and those human rights violations against the discrimination and human rights violations faced by other peoples.

Intersectionality is not meant to dismiss the harm that discrimination and human rights violations cause anyone. It is not meant to say, “Your pain is less than mine” or “Your pain is nothing compared to mine.” It is also not meant to say that your privileges make you less vulnerable to discrimination and human rights violations. We understand and appreciate privilege through experience and observation of lived realities. Hence, why many would consider a white, heterosexual male having more privileges and access to opportunities compared to a Black woman.

Intersectionality is meant to help us remember that all of us suffer disadvantages and enjoy privileges, not only because of the many social elements and characteristics that make up our identity, but also because of the specific systems of power and social context we can benefit from or are discriminated by.

While at any one point in time, we may find ourselves able to leverage the privileges to access justice or seek redress better than another in a given system, in the case of discrimination, it is a completely different scenario. The person(s) suffering the discrimination is/are asked to collect and

provide evidence of the discrimination, raise awareness, develop alliances, create and produce language that describes the discrimination and suggest solutions both in terms of practices and policies and in the longer term change cultural norms that reside in the collective unconscious.

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Image source: Teaching Tolerance. 2016. Intersectionality 101. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE . Accessed on 21 June 2019.

For example, we understand that rich people can suffer racial discrimination like anyone else if they are part of a discriminated racial minority/community. However, a rich person has a social network that poorer people may not, and could leverage that in order to access justice or to seek redress.

Our intersectional lens tells us that at any one point in time, we may suffer disadvantages in more ways and forms than others because of the multiple structural social elements and characteristics of power that are reflected and enacted through and because of our sexuality.

To exemplify, the capabilities of a Muslim lesbian who is visibly masculine or “tomboyish” may not be as well appreciated compared to a heterosexual woman who is feminine, yet both may suffer gender discrimination in terms of job promotion, training opportunities and salary scale.

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Image source: Teaching Tolerance. 2016. Intersectionality 101. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE . Accessed on 21 June 2019.

Intersectionality particularly helps us to build a map of relationships between the elements of our self-defined or socially perceived identity and the structural acceptance and resonance within the system, being it a country, a family, a university, a street.

Intersectionality particularly helps us to link and realise not only why but how someone experiences various degrees of economic, social, political and technological discrimination compared to someone else who might at first sight otherwise appear to share a similar “identity”.

For example, a Chinese woman from a rich family may be forced to marry someone she does not love in order to increase or protect the family’s wealth, whereas a poor Chinese woman may be sold off as someone’s wife or slave in order to pay off the family’s debts. Here, both suffer gender discrimination as women, but the assumption here would be that the rich Chinese woman should

be able to get out of her predicament better than the poor woman, and yet this is not necessarily so.

Having an intersectional lens will force us to look at both the social contexts and the power of these two women much more closely and to understand the reasons for their discrimination and human rights violations.

It is important that we use our intersectional analysis not to place blame or guilt on each other to the point that conversations become defensive or impossible, but to make visible both individual privileges and discrimination as well as systems of privilege and discrimination.

One of the practices that intersectionality brings is about interaction, about using a both/and framing instead of either/or. It is not about establishing if sexuality or gender matters more than caste or race, it is about looking at their relationship, at where they intersect, augment and reinforce discrimination and/or privilege. Exploring, questioning and making visible the simultaneous, dynamic intersection of one's positionality works for social, cultural and economic context, as well as for understanding power.

1. Privileges and how those privileges can be used to help bring about a more socially, politically, economically and technologically just society.
2. Disadvantages and how those disadvantages are reinforced both structurally and systemically.

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1 Developing Intersectional Solidarities: A Plea for Queer Intersectionality, Sirma Bilge, in Beyond the Queer Alphabet: Conversations on Gender, Sexuality & Intersectionality, edited by Malinda S. Smith and Fatima Jaffer.

Intersectionality of sexuality and internet governance

Intersectionality has been present in international policy spaces since 2001, as proved by Article 119 of the NGO Forum Declaration at the World Conference Against Racism definition applied to discrimination:

[It] acknowledges that every person be it man or woman exists in a framework of multiple identities, with factors such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability, citizenship, national identity, geo-political context, health, including HIV/AIDS status and any other status are all determinants in one's experiences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerances. An intersectional approach highlights the way in which there is a simultaneous interaction of discrimination as a result of multiple identities. (WCAR NGO Forum 2001)

The forum signed a turning point for the use of intersectionality, which moved from a national civil and social rights context to become an international human rights framework applied by global institutional actors.

At the same time, the emphasis on identity contained in the declaration contributed to a wrong perception of intersectionality as just another “identity politics” theory. To avoid this misunderstanding, it is important to go back to the strong focus on social justice that Kimberlé Crenshaw had formulated and reiterated through the years, including in the keynote presentation at the WOW Festival in 2016.

If we look at use of and access to technology and the internet, intersectionality immediately becomes a tool to help us not only make sense of the situation but to achieve social justice. The purpose of intersectionality is transformative.

How many people have access to the internet? What are the conditions and quality of their access to technology? How safe are they in their use? How visible and respected are their voices/positions? By whom and how is technology designed?

All these questions have their place in the governance of the internet.

All the questions around the “who”, from access to content creation and moderation, surveillance, artificial intelligence and so forth, are exactly the questions that intersectionality can help to make sense of. That’s why the way we think and use “identities” is in terms of relationships, as a way of understanding how the existing/perceived linkage(s) between gender, sexuality and all the other elements of our identities (multiple fluid contextual selves) need policies to make the internet and digital technology a welcoming, open, accessible and affordable place/space for everyone.

It is the interplay of our perceived and self-defined identities in a given space (internet) that we want to address in national, regional and global spaces where the governance of the internet is discussed by all stakeholder groups, from the powerful private corporations and national governments to women’s rights, sexual rights and digital rights activists, to academia and the technical community that develops and approves the standards and protocols of this global critical resource.

Our policy/governance work starts from the understanding and denouncing of the interplay of our multiple identities to address the complexity of social inequalities, existing powers and specificity of contexts, aiming to achieve social justice.

Access to the internet for the majority of people in most parts of the world is in itself a privilege – how often you have access to it, how fast your access may be, who controls your access, and so on. This issue of access (and affordability) falls under internet governance.

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Reading materials

Primary reading materials

The Politics of Sex

https://www.genderit.org/politics-sex

In Plain Sight: Sexuality Rights and the Internet in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka

https://genderit.org/articles/plain-sight-sexuality-rights-and-internet-india-nepal-and-sri-lanka

Big Data and Sexual Surveillance

https://www.genderit.org/resources/big-data-and-sexual-surveillance

Additional resources

The False Paradox: Freedom of Expression and Sexist Hate Speech

https://www.apc.org/en/blog/false-paradox-freedom-expression-and-sexist-hate-speech

Anonymity, Accountability and the Public Sphere

http://gigx.events.apc.org/2015/06/23/anonymity-accountability-and-the-public-sphere/

How crucial is anonymity for sexual exploration and promoting sexual rights activism?

https://www.apc.org/en/blog/how-crucial-anonymity-sexual-exploration-and-promoting-sexual-rights-activism

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association and the Internet

https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/freedom-peaceful-assembly-and-freedom-association

Data 101–Privacy International

http://gigx.events.apc.org/2015/06/23/data-101-privacy-international/

Gender, Sexuality and Access to Rights Exercise: Trainer’s Notes

http://gigx.events.apc.org/2015/07/14/gender-sexuality-and-access-to-rights-exercise-trainers-

notes/

Women’s Rights, Gender and Internet Governance
http://gigx.events.apc.org/2015/06/24/womens-rights-gender-and-internet-governance-issue-paper/

Freedom of Expression and Opinion
https://prezi.com/n-geute8wpfp/freedom-of-expression-and-opinion/

Kimberlé Crenshaw: On Intersectionality – keynote at WOW 2016
https://youtu.be/-DW4HLgYPlA

Developing Intersectional Solidarities: A Plea for Queer Intersectionality, by Sirma Bilge, in Beyond the Queer Alphabet: Conversations on Gender, Sexuality & Intersectionality, edited by Malinda S. Smith and Fatima Jaffer
https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/equity/documents/Beyond_the_Queer_Alphabet_20_March_2012.pdf

Intersectionality, Patricia Hills Collins and Sirma Bilge, Polity Press, 2016