

INTERSECTIONALITY

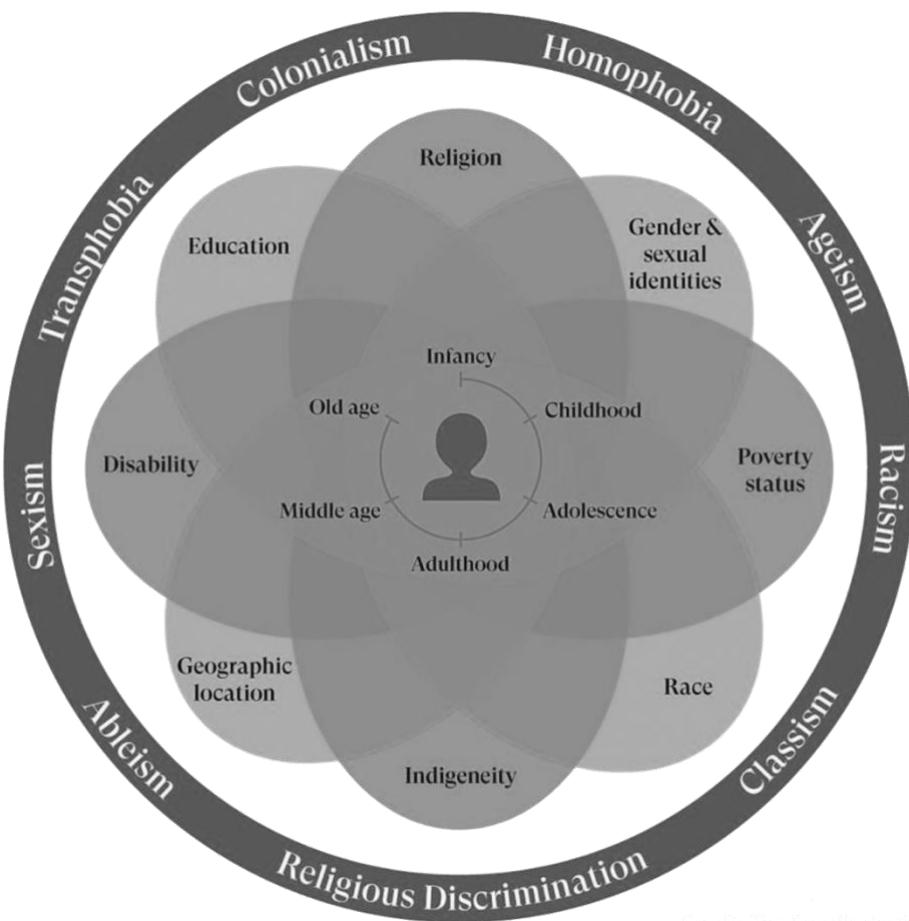
"There was one thing that unified us: the fight to be recognized for who we are, as lesbians, as gays, as trans folks, as intersex people, across the world, and yet we were quite slow in recognizing not only the privileges we hold but the other systems of oppression that are key in our fight for sexual liberation"

Phumi Mtetwa, JASS Southern Africa

IN WORDS

Intersectionality is a way to understand how different aspects of people's identity interact and converge to shape very different experiences of life, and power.

How do gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and other differences shape us and our contexts? For Phumi Mtetwa, a working-class black lesbian feminist in South Africa, these intersections shaped the injustices she has faced and also the ways she has organized for change.



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"Intersectionality is a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. ... It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts."

Kimberle Crenshaw, Professor of Law at Columbia University and University of California Los Angeles, who coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989

IN HER OWN WORDS

Phumi Mtetwa: How Can We Walk Together in Struggle?

I started to organise around apartheid of course and I came out young in the anti-apartheid movement but possibly one of the things that, a lot comes out about me is being an open black lesbian in a particular moment in South Africa.

My parents were factory workers. I grew up in a township constructed by apartheid. This is where blacks should live and they should live like this. And coming out as a lesbian at the time in a context in which also women are supposed to be this and not that. So trying to break a lot of boundaries and then my own political education about oppression at that time when “a system” and I say a system because we sought to eliminate this system of apartheid and we thought by eliminating it we will all be equal. All freedoms will come. Wouldn’t that have been beautiful?

There was one thing that unified us: the fight to be recognised for who we are, as lesbians, as gays, as trans folks, as intersex people, across the world, and yet we were quite slow in recognising not only the privileges we hold but the other systems of oppression that are key in our fight for let’s say sexual liberation.

I live in a township, organise in the city of Jo’burg. It’s not always easy to move. There are restrictions of when blacks can be in Jo’burg. All of those cracks began to show. The men have the microphone much more, as patriarchy re-entrenched in a whole thing that talks about eliminating a system. So all of those things, even about work, you know. You have a job, you have car, you have a house. You have all this, which continues to this day to be a critical point of departure for how we are able to walk together in struggle.

Last year we hosted something we called Defending Human Rights in Hostile Contexts. You found unlikely people in the same room. So we have people defending land that is affected by extractives and mining, we have unionists, we have LGBTI people, we have sex workers, we have women who sell their farm products in markets, we have HIV positive people. We have possibly every struggle in our context present in the room and using the power framework, the idea of everyone based on where they are sitting, to actually be able to see how power operates and where energies are invested in challenging that power might not be necessarily the good strategic place to invest energies. And to be in conversation about those issues with people in a comradely fashion.

JASS doesn’t pretend to have all the answers. We don’t! We also don’t pretend that these concepts like intersectionality has a beginning and an end in terms of definition for example. The world is changing and so, as we grow in our knowledge and understanding how complex the world is, we just always hope that what we offer is relevant, timely and makes sense for movement strategies.

IN JASS

Intersectionality is a crucial dimension of building movements. If we can understand how we are weakened by our lack of understanding and solidarity across lines of difference, we can work to heal divisions and build trust. When we see the intersections and connections among our struggles and our futures intertwined, we can forge alliances based in our collective power.

We see intersectionality as a tool for analysis and strategy, having meaning on three levels.

1. Intersectional identities

Our complex identities – in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability and other factors – translate into different experiences and institutions of power, privilege, access and safety.

2. Intersectional systems

Our institutions are shaped by the intersecting logics of systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy and colonialism. Inequities are baked into the family, school, workplace, parliament.

3. Intersectional solutions

Our lived experiences of all of our identities form a rich base of knowledge from which to envision and lead change.

IN ACTION

Dalila de Jesús Vázquez: Transforming Oppression into Liberty

Los pueblos originarios pasamos de ser servidores a la colonia a ser servidores a la oligarca en nuestros países

Indigenous peoples went from serving the colonies to serving the oligarchies in our countries.

Entonces para nosotras no ha habido verdadera independencia, y ahora seguimos viviendo esa opresión porque las empresas extractivas nos están despojando nuevamente de nuestros territorios.
So for us there has not been true independence, and we are still living in oppression because of extractivism and the displacement it causes.

Cuando salimos de Guatemala por el conflicto armado y llegamos a México asumimos una identidad de refugiadas porque nos sentíamos así, refugiadas estando en México.

When we left Guatemala because of the armed conflict and arrived in Mexico, we identified ourselves as refugees, because in Mexico we felt like refugees.

Refugee

Luego, regresamos a Guatemala y nuestra identidad pasa ahora por ser retornadas, aunque éramos de Guatemala, habíamos sido refugiadas, luego regresamos a Guatemala, nuestro país. Entonces ya éramos el grupo como de las retornadas, no.

Later, when we returned to Guatemala, our identities shifted again and we became returnees, because although we were Guatemalan, we were once refugees, and then returned to Guatemala, our country. So then we became the group of returnees.

Returnee

Sin embargo, a partir de que regresamos a Guatemala empezamos a construir nuestra organización comunitaria y asumimos entonces la identidad de mujeres rurales, indígenas y campesinas porque muchas de nosotras habíamos perdido la identidad de indígena estando en México precisamente por el miedo a la represión. Sin embargo al regresar a Guatemala, retomamos nuestra identidad de indígenas porque somos indígenas.

However, once we returned to Guatemala, we began to build our community organization. And we then assumed the identity of rural, indigenous, and peasant women because many of us lost our indigenous identity in Mexico because of our fear of repression. However, when we returned to Guatemala, we upheld our indigenous identity because we are indigenous people.

Indigenous

Las comunidades indígenas, especialmente las mujeres, seguimos invisibilizadas en las políticas y en los puestos públicos, y no se quiere reconocer esas formas que nosotras tenemos de gobernarnos y esas formas que tenemos de convivir.

The indigenous communities, especially women, remain invisible in politics and public offices, and our forms of governing ourselves and coexisting remain unacknowledged.

Pero también el hecho de ubicarnos en el área rural nos daba una identidad diferente. Entonces, si nosotras nos asumimos como campesinas, estamos reconociendo ese rol que tenemos en la producción de alimentos, en la contribución a la economía del país que no es reconocida pero que está contribuyendo.

Also, living in rural communities provided us a different identity. So, if we assume the identity of peasant women, we are recognizing the role that we have in the production of food and its contribution to the national economy.

Al momento de nosotras exigir que se nos reconozca, es también visibilizarnos desde nuestros aportes, desde nuestras identidades para exigir entonces que haya políticas específicas para nosotras las mujeres rurales, indígenas y campesinas que en Guatemala hasta el momento no hay. *When we exert that our contributions be noted, we will also show ourselves to the world from the perspective of our contributions, from our identities to exert specific policies for us rural, indigenous and peasant women that don't exist today in Guatemala.*

Rural

Entonces nuestro ideal es no más represión, no más despojo. Queremos vivir desde nuestras formas ancestrales de colectividad, desde nuestras relaciones ancestrales con la madre naturaleza, sentirnos como una integrante más de la naturaleza, que se respete esa visión y esa forma de vida y que se nos reconozca como pueblos.

Our ideal is no more repression, no more dispossession. We want to live by our ancestral values of community and collective action, our ancestral relation with mother nature, we want to feel part of nature. And we want this vision and way of life to be respected, and to be recognized as peoples.

Collective organizing

Cada uno pues nos identificamos desde el espacio y desde el territorio en que vivimos y es ahí donde vemos las particularidades. Entonces esas particularidades nos dan nuevos alimentos para fortalecer el trabajo que realizamos, para seguir diciendo no estamos solas y para seguir diciendo podemos solidarizarnos a nivel de los diferentes territorios y de las diferentes resistencias, y que juntas y juntos, si logramos mantener esa comunicación, podemos ir transformando nuestras realidades de opresión a una realidad de libertad, de verdadera democracia y de ejercicio de derechos.

Each one of our identities depends on the space we live in and where we live. These differences, then, give us new resources to strengthen our work and continue saying that we are not alone, and continue increasing solidarity at the regional level so that together we can maintain communication and transform our current reality of oppression into a reality of liberty, real democracy, and exercised rights.

IN ACTION

Patricia Ardon: Trust is a Big Power

La Puya resistance is not only women but women playing a very important role in it, organizing to stop the mine, to stop the gold mine that is bringing a lot of pollution, not only damaging the environment but also destructing the culture and damaging our social network because it divides the community.

And the case of la Puya resistance is quite important, quite different because it brings together indigenous communities and *mestizo*. And this concept of complementarity is quite important here because it is also a concept in the Mayan philosophy so to speak, so it really is understandable.

There are more men killed each year because of their defense of the land and territory but women suffer that, live that in a different way and the impact is differentiated because women are generally subjects of sexual violence and rape. But the women just come in front of the demonstrations singing religious songs, for instance, you know, strengthening the peaceful character of the resistance and the demonstration. So, they have a set of strategies that really go beyond the very confrontational ones, doing what they call turns to stop the machinery of the mine to get into the territories and this has happened for 8 years, 24 hours a day. Which is just in itself incredible, you know, the kind of resistance that they have had.

I think a lot of what JASS does is important because of how we do it not only what we do. We say our style of work in that sense makes the difference. The kind of accompaniment and the support that we do is based on the trust that is built sometimes for many years with these women so that they ask and building trust is a key and central part of how we work.

We link very much intersectionality with identity and this is a process. It's not something we do in one conversation. Indigenous peoples, indigenous women are not all the same. And non-indigenous or mestizo women are not the same. There are some things that unite us, and that we feel very strongly, for instance racism, and we talk about racism against indigenous women mainly but also I can feel racism if I go to other countries, to other contexts or in front of the rich people here for instance who are in the majority blonde and with blue eyes, because of the colonisation process. So, we start digging more from their experience so that we are able to see that within those identities there also differences in terms of class, and can complement each other and can build collective power by recognising the different powers that women and that we all have to build towards a common objective.

What is the power that you have? What is the power that you bring here? It's great you have the capacity to bring together women from the community because they trust you, that's a big power.

So we start from that, from the very concrete thing to try to make it visible – how the different powers that we have are important to deal with a systemic problem and to increase the impact that we can have on that systemic dynamics and *problematics*.

And then this kind of a process to make it visible how we cannot really make big impact if we don't ally with others.

"Gender, ethnicity and class can divide us but, when we recognize and build on our differences, intersectional organizing makes us much more powerful and resilient."

IN DEPTH

Patriarchy doesn't work alone. It is intertwined with other systems of domination based on race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and other aspects of identity. As a result, women experience inequality differently.

1. Intersectional identities

Our complex identities – in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability and other factors – translate into different experiences and institutions of power, privilege, access and safety. Women, including trans women and gender-nonconforming people, experience inequality differently:

- A Dalit woman in India might face sexual exploitation by upper caste men, lower wages than a Dalit man, less access to education than girls of higher castes, and more social stigma – not only because she is female, but because of her caste identity.

- People of color within LGBTQ movements; girls of color in the fight against the school-to-prison pipeline; women within immigration movements; trans women within feminist movements; and people with disabilities fighting police abuse – all face vulnerabilities that reflect the intersections of racism, sexism, transphobia, able-ism and other factors.
- An educated white woman may have race and class privilege but still might experience domestic violence and exclusion as a woman.

The famous question posed by former slave and abolition activist, Sojourner Truth – ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ – reminds us to fight for justice for all women at the intersections of race, class, sexuality

“That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?⁹

Sojourner Truth, from “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech delivered to the 1851 Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, USA

<https://youtu.be/-OYR1eiGOus>

“The struggle is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”

Gloria Anzaldua: Borderlands/La Frontera

2. Intersectional systems

Our institutions – the family, the workplace and beyond – are shaped by the intersecting logics of systems such as patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy and colonialism.

“Intersectionality is the basis for collective liberation. By acknowledging the full complexity of ourselves and seeing and including others struggling for freedom and equality *as part of our own struggle*, we find the basis for a much larger alliance for change, and a more transformative, inclusive vision for change. And if we do not build that commitment to intersectional identity and struggle, we risk fighting for change that still preserves the conditions of someone else’s oppression.”

JASS

3. Intersectional solutions

Our lived experiences of all of our identities form a rich base of knowledge from which to envision and lead change. As we support the leadership of women on the frontlines and build alliances, unity emerges when we:

- learn about each other’s histories and experiences
- build trust and genuine collaboration across difference
- address past and present patterns of exclusion, inequity and discrimination in our movements
- center the voices, ideas and solutions of those most excluded and silenced
- share leadership and power thoughtfully

- deepen our commitment and experiences of standing with each other
- imagine visions of freedom and justice which speak to everyone

JASS, Furia and Raising Voices: The [Zines Toolkit](#)

“Potentially powerful alliances for social justice – from North–South coalitions to linkages between grassroots constituencies and global policy advocates – confront important questions connected to privilege and control. In some cases, unresolved tensions stymy progress, while other alliances manage to recognize and address differences within their ranks. For example, the food sovereignty movement is piecing together common ground among diverse groups: small-scale farmers, anti-hunger activists, peasant federations and middle-class consumers worried about health and food quality.”

[Power: Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace](#), JASS Making Change Happen 3

Examples

- *Create intentional spaces for specific groups to come together:* An example is the [Black Feminisms Forum](#) ahead of the 2016 AWID Forum
- *Foster sisterhood across many differences:* The [Feminist Forum in Uganda](#) offers spaces for members to talk freely and “unleash some madness”, and build connections and shared understanding across the diversity of their movements
- *Challenge language that reiterates exclusion:* Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action ([CREA](#)) challenges women’s organizations to think about who is included in the term “all women”, and deliberately use terms such as “gender-based violence” to specifically include gender non-conforming people and trans women
- *Build power and safety through solidarity:* [FAMM](#), a network of young women in Indonesia, focuses on building solidarity across differences of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion and origin

IN MANY VOICES

“We need to start listening to ALL women, not only women who have been privileged through birth, geography, economics or just luck.”

Theo Sowa, African Women’s Development Fund

“Some of these identities give us a leg up, while others push us a rung down the ladder. The combination of identities can compound (or diminish) advantage or compound (or relieve) harm, and there are perhaps endless variations. The point of intersectional practice is to look at all these possible combinations of privilege and vulnerability, rather than just stopping with the ones that apply to us, whoever we are.”

Rinku Sen, US racial justice activist and writer

“And now of course is a particularly challenging time because we have a number of right-wing populists that have co-opted electoral political processes, and they have started to speak the language of xenophobia, racism, or sexism, and they have basically exploited people’s insecurities to create the societies around the basis of imagined identity, imagined cultural homogeneity, whereas the history of human civilization has always been the history of migration, the history of assimilation.”

Mandeep Tiwana, Civicus

“The framing of political agendas by ... movements is also a fascinating process. In some movements, the evolution is from one or two gendered interests / issues (home-based care for the ill, collective

spaces for mothers, recognition of domestic work as labor, removal of caste-based discrimination, access to health services, or inclusion in peace negotiations) to a more complex and intersectional analysis. ... In other cases, the agenda and the analysis underlying it quickly assumes complexity ... even if collective action is focused on particular struggles."

Srilatha Batliwala: Changing Their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements, AWID

"Before this framework [intersectional feminism] was articulated, there was a lot more fragmentation in social justice organizing and thinking. Civil rights groups organized around race and against racism; feminist organizations organized around women's issues and women. It didn't take long, though, before it became clear to some people — most particularly women of color — that all these single-issue organizations were missing the ways that they were personally impacted as *both* women and black people."

Katrina Brown, blog

"For our movements to end violence against women and girls it is important to see and name how various forms of violence interact and compound to affect different women and girls in specific ways. For most, class, race, and gender are simultaneous forces. It is not **race + class + gender** but **race x class s gender.**"

Ayesha Imam, Women in Nigeria/, UNFPA

"Before, we were confronting governments and states, but now we're looking at other actors, we're looking at the corporate sector, we're looking at land developers, mining companies, particularly the extractive industry all over the world."

Fidelis Mudzimu, Counselling Services Unit, Zimbabwe

"Our beliefs about bodies disproportionately impact those whose race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age deviate from our default notions. The further from the default, the greater the impact. We are all affected – but not equally."

Sonya Renee Taylor: The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love

"I voiced my conviction that the struggle to end racism and the struggle to end sexism were naturally intertwined, that to make them separate was to deny a basic truth of our existence, that race and sex are both immutable facets of human identity."

bell hooks: Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism

"The cutting edge of intersectionality is a liberation agenda – refusing to allow some people to be left out of freedom, equality, decisions, sharing in power. Our collective power has to be truly collective and there is work to be done to get there. We can see how some people (e.g. white women) often throw in their lot with white male dominance out of a sense of scarcity and fear. But an intersectional agenda offers the possibility of well-being that comes from mutual respect and equitable treatment."

Alexa Bradley, Shereen Essof, Lisa VeneKlasen in conversation, JASS

"The concept of intersectionality evolved in part as a response to critiques that 'women' as a political category over-generalized women's experiences, privileging white, middle-class women, while making invisible the ways that race, class, colonialism, and other factors of discrimination contribute to the experience of oppression. Intersectionality aims to move beyond overly simplified conceptions of identity – such as 'working class' or 'indigenous' – to examine complexities of multiple sources of privilege and subordination."

Lisa VeneKlasen and Valerie Miller, JASS

IN GROUPS

JASS brings an intersectional lens to our work on multiple levels:

- to build understanding and trust among women who are different
- to deepen our analysis of the interconnected structures of oppression
- to enable us to work with allies who are different but share some of our political goals
- to define a change agenda that doesn't leave some parts of ourselves or our communities out
- to build political power

At different moments we use different methodologies and tools to understand and apply the concept of intersectionality. How do identity, power, subordination, and exclusion affect our organizations, ourselves as individuals, and our social change strategies? How can we best join forces across our identities to forge interconnected movements?

1. Intersectional identities

An activity called the [Identify Flower](#) demonstrates how diverse identities coexist within each of us and change throughout our lives. It introduces the idea of intersectionality and a dynamic view of personal and collective development.

Through the [Power Flower](#) exercise, a group can explore intersectionality more deeply. We come to appreciate the relational nature of power and understand how our intersecting identities contribute to both oppression and privilege.

2. Intersectional systems

To clarify the concept of patriarchy and the various systems of oppression, group participants construct a [Master's House](#). Where and how do we learn about being "women" and "men"? In mapping out gender rules, we understand patriarchy as a system – the Master's House – rather than individual behavior or experience. The activity challenges us to consider how, in big and small ways, we ourselves build and maintain patriarchy.

This Big Idea - INTERSECTIONALITY - is online on the JASS site.

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