

JASS BIG IDEAS: INTERSECTIONALITY



Phumi Mtetwa, South Africa

Walk together in struggle

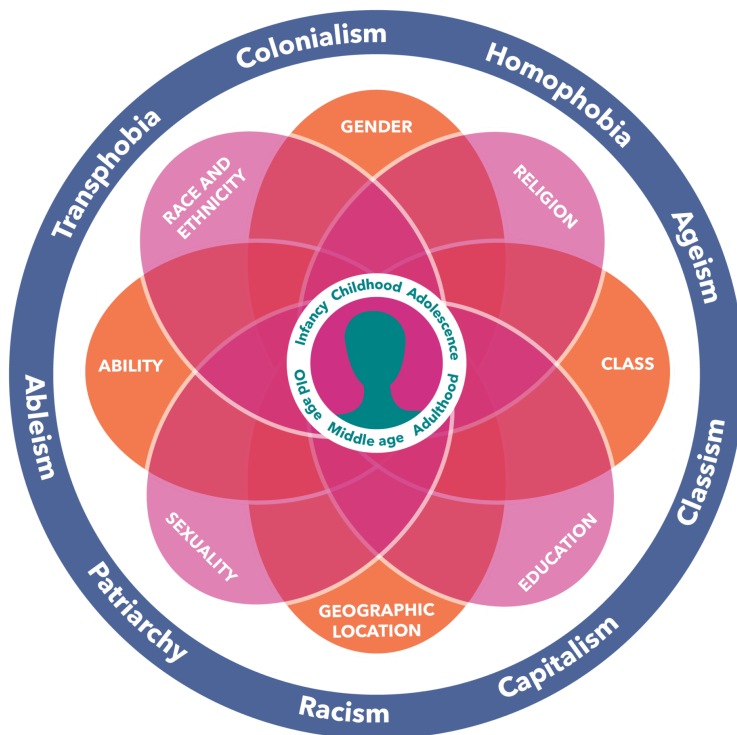
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“There was one thing that unified us: the fight to be recognized for who we are, as lesbians, as gays, as trans folks, as intersex people, across the world, and yet we were quite slow in recognizing not only the privileges we hold but the other systems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

[Phumi Mtetwa](#), JASS Southern Africa

IN BRIEF

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.



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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.

“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.”

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor of Law at Columbia University and University of California Los Angeles, who coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989



Awino Okech, Kenya

Making the Connections

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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. **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. **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.

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3. **Solutions:** Our lived experiences of all 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
[Watch on YouTube](#)



Alexa Bradley, United States
We don't have to be the same to be united
[Watch on YouTube](#)

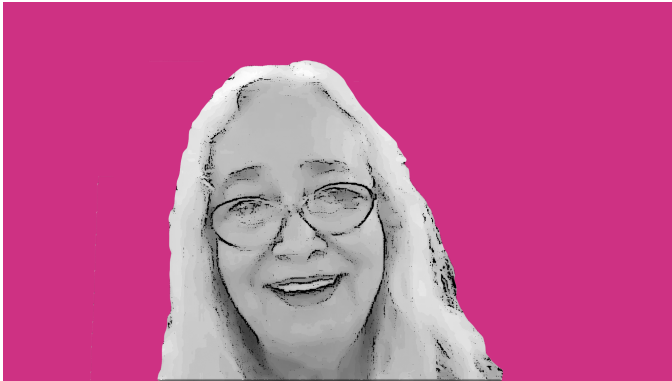
IN DEPTH

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

How do you understand intersectionality in your own lives, activism, and visions of a just world? We asked five JASS team members to think about intersectionality.

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Alda Facio
Humanity is a Forest
[Watch on YouTube](#)



Patricia Ardón
Trust is a Big Power
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Rosa Chávez
Healing our history
[Watch on YouTube](#)

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Zukiswa White

A tool but not a vision

[Watch on YouTube](#)



Niken Lestari

We Need Sisterhood

[Watch on YouTube](#)

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?”

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

“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

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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.”

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3. INTERSECTIONAL SOLUTIONS

Our lived experiences of all 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: [Intersectionality & Movement Building: The Zines](#)*

“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 series 3

“**Solidarity is a practice.** It’s not something we are or something we believe: it’s something we do. We can choose to stand with others to dismantle the political and economic institutions that harm them and us, or we can choose to look away.”

Nicole Cardoza, Anti-Racism Daily

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“We can’t just say, ‘I’m in solidarity with you.’ Those are empty words unless we back it up with action.”

Isabel Kang of LA’s Korean Resource Center

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

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girls in specific ways. For most, class, race, and gender are simultaneous forces. It is not *race + class + gender* but *race x class x 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 must 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

“Black feminism emerged as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender, and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit. At the time of its emergence, Black women were frequently asked to choose whether the Black movement or the women’s movement was most important. The response was that this was the wrong question.”

Angela Y. Davis, Freedom is a Constant Struggle

“The concept of intersectionality evolved in part as a response to a 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

“I understood intersectionality – the way that white supremacy props up patriarchy props up poverty props up environmental destruction props up white supremacy again – on a gut level, even if I didn’t know to call it ‘intersectionality’ yet. I understood that sex workers are often stigmatized, barred from claiming their full humanity, by sexist culture and feminist movements alike.... I understood that by challenging gender norms and conventional masculinity, I was challenging, well, everything. Through challenging the idea of manhood,

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of being ‘a good man,’ of ‘manning up,’ I was burrowing deep into the core of power, privilege, and hierarchy. On a gut level, I understood that my freedom and liberation were wrapped up with those of so many others who were facing oppression.”

Jacob Tobia, Sissy: A Coming-of-Gender Story

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. Identities

An activity called the [Identity 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. 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.

Check out more movement-building tools about Intersectionality on our [We Rise website](#).

This [Big Idea - INTERSECTIONALITY](#) - is online on the [JASS](#) (justassociates.org) site. Created by and for JASS by Pemba Productions.