

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives”

Audre Lorde<sup>1</sup>

# Intersectionality: Ask the other question

The international development sector is aware that multiple sources of disadvantage and discrimination impact peoples' lives, and that marginalisation is magnified when these overlap and intersect. This is reflected in a growing focus on the intersection of factors such as disability, gender, class and caste. However, increased awareness and traction of the concept of 'intersectionality' has not yet translated into a deep understanding of its implications or well-defined and readily available tools and processes for development actors to understand and engage with myriad identities. This article delves into some of the key proponents and literature that gave rise to the concept of intersectionality, the debates that informed its evolution and use, and shares some insights on how to “ask the other question” to inform more nuanced development approaches.<sup>#</sup>

## Historical roots and definitional dilemmas

The concept of intersectionality is popularly credited to Kimberlé Crenshaw, and the race, class and gender theorists she drew on.<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw sought to better understand how the experiences that women of colour had with the legal system in the

United States were shaped by their sex and race.<sup>3</sup> Crenshaw argued that sexism and racism were either artificially analysed as distinct and separate, or simplistically added together, rather than recognising the ways in which oppressive constructs in society intersect in complex and compounding ways.<sup>4</sup> In the context of violence against women, she observed that “*the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class*”.<sup>5</sup> While there is general consensus that the term intersectionality is about “*race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate[ing] not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena*”,<sup>6</sup> definitions of what intersectionality means in practice continue to evolve.

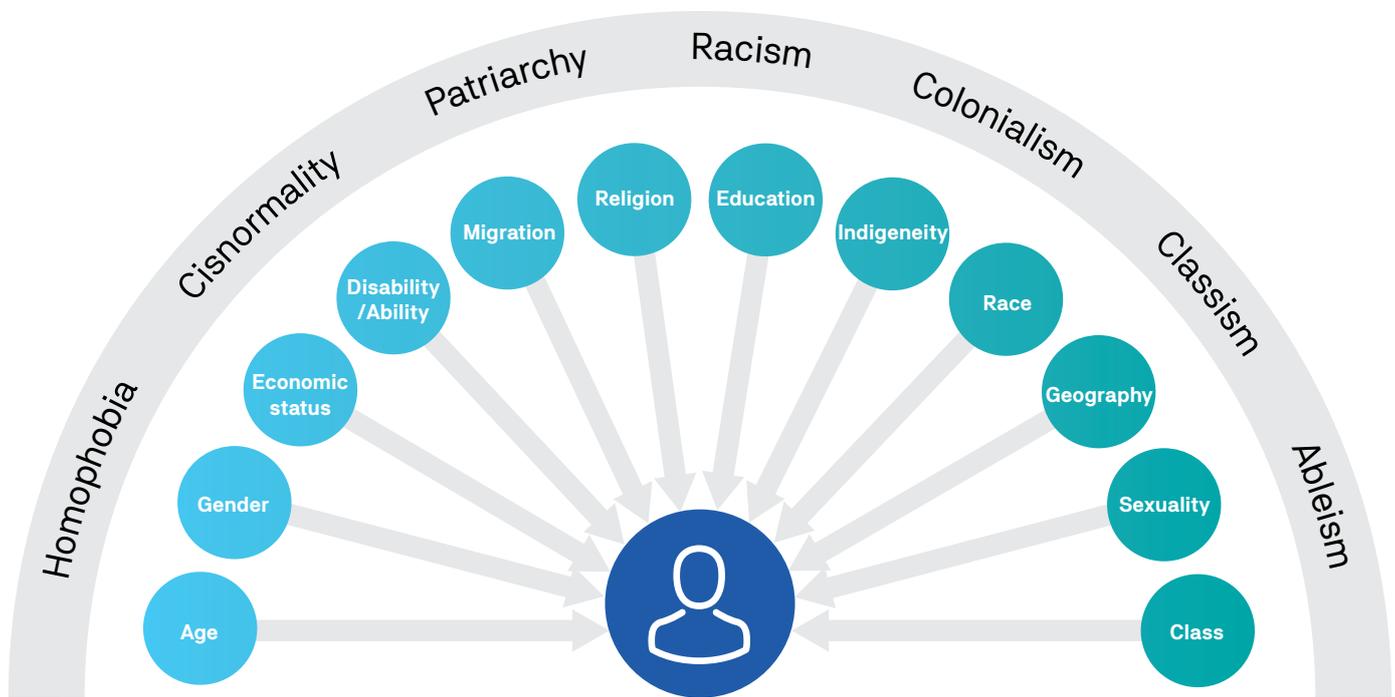
Defining intersectionality involves confronting complexity, diverse human influences, structures of power and inter-connected systems. In research and development practice, intersectionality thinking calls on us to “*improve our understanding of inequality through better reflecting the complexity of the real world.*”<sup>7</sup> Humans are shaped by a range of influences, and cannot be defined or known through only one or two dimensions.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Human

interactions occur within structures of power and connected systems including political, religious, economic, legal and cultural systems. Through complex interactions, shaped by colonialism, racism, homophobia, patriarchy and ableism (discrimination in favour of able-bodied people), a range of forms of *privilege and oppression* are created.<sup>11</sup> Considering this, and drawing on Collins, intersectionality can be thought of as “an attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities.”<sup>12</sup> . Importantly, Collins notes it to be an evolving concept that is continually shaped by those that adopt, think about, question and use it.

Key intersectional characteristics of an individual (such as age, class, gender etc.) and interacting societal power structures (racism, patriarchy, homophobia etc.) are presented in Figure 1 as an example of the multiplicity, and complexity of intersectionality thinking and concepts. The Figure presents a range of concepts to provide a simplified visual representation of the multiple characteristics/identities and overlapping systems of power that shape these.\*

<sup>#</sup> This 'conversational article' tackles a complex area, and hence whilst our aim was to make the relevant academic ideas and thinking accessible to development practitioners and a wider audience, we recognise that this article uses some terms and concepts that may not be easily understood. This was to avoid over-simplification or misinterpretation of the literature presented, and we encourage readers to explore further by reading the original articles to which we refer.

<sup>\*</sup> Cisnormativity: assumption that all human beings are cisgender (have a gender identity which matches the sex they were assigned at birth). Indigeneity: quality of being indigenous or being a member of an indigenous group.



**Figure 1. Representation of intersectionality from the perspective of individual characteristics and societal power structures. Source: Authors.**

## Emerging critiques and contemporary applications

Intersectionality has been heralded as making an important theoretical contribution to women's studies.<sup>13</sup> Yet questions of *how* to study intersectionality and apply an intersectional lens to development practice remain.<sup>14</sup> Collins suggests this may be linked to an avoidance of its political and activist implications.<sup>15</sup> Intersectionality calls on us not to be blind to systemic power dynamics which enable multiple inequalities and oppressions.

Other critiques include that intersectional discourse: (i) doesn't define who experiences intersectional layers of discrimination;<sup>16,17,18</sup> (ii) does not adequately focus on the structural factors (political, economic, cultural, religious) that underpin inequalities;<sup>19,20,21</sup> and (iii) lacks a clear and implementable methodology to analyse, understand and incorporate into development approaches.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, intersectionality discourse is important to engage with, especially as development organisations strive to

"leave no one behind". We now unpack each of these three key critiques.

### (i) Who is 'intersectional'?

One of the challenges of applying intersectionality discourse is coming to an understanding of 'who is intersectional' and the risk of obscuring intra-group differences.<sup>23</sup> The question of who experiences multiple levels of disadvantage asks whether it applies to all citizens, or only those individuals and groups who are marginalised through multiple identities?<sup>24</sup> Another consideration is to whose perspective are these identities being defined (i.e. labelling someone as a 'person with a disability' when they don't see themselves that way)? Or the fact that identities can be hidden (i.e. sexuality) and that identities change over time based on our experiences. As such, unpacking these intersecting identities is key to understanding discrimination and exclusion. As Bastia notes, if *"intersectionality is to work as an anti-exclusionary tool, then it needs to address both privilege and oppression and how different axes of differentiation work through each other to produce both"*.<sup>25</sup>

While intersectionality can assist in highlighting multiple oppressions within a certain social group, common categorisations such as gender and class may risk obscuring other intra-group differences.<sup>26,27,28</sup> This was exemplified in internationally funded programs aimed to empower women in rural areas of Western Nepal, by improving access to water. Differences in women's age, marital status, caste, remittance flow and land ownership affected how they benefited from these projects.<sup>29</sup> In particular, Dalit caste women were disadvantaged within the group of female villagers, whilst women who had more agency were able to negotiate favourable outcomes for themselves and their families.<sup>30</sup> In some contexts, highlighting what all women have in common might be important, yet this may mask or downplay differences between women. Such differences (around caste, age etc) need to be understood in order to address a broader range of needs, and avoid unintended consequences of marginalization or reinforcing existing power dynamics.

## (ii) Accounting for structural inequalities

Taking an intersectional approach has been found to sometimes focus more on the *characteristics* of the people in question (e.g. their race, gender or class), rather than understanding the *structural factors* (racism, patriarchy, cisnormativity that pervade social, political and economic systems) that create and continue inequalities.<sup>31,32,33</sup> For example, in the context of international development practice, such structural factors include the power of one race relative to another as a result of, including but not limited to, colonialism.<sup>34</sup> Historic colonial relationships have led, for example, to an international aid industry dominated by organisations and staff (including local staff) that largely come from a different socio-economic stratum than the populations with whom they work.<sup>35</sup> Another example is the British penal code which prohibited same-sex sexual relations, thus criminalising sexual diversity that was at least partially accepted in some pre-colonial societies. Rather than focusing on the characteristics of being gay or lesbian, a structural approach would address such issues of heteronormativity (a perspective that sees acceptable spousal/sexual relationships as occurring only between women and men), and its embedded assumption that there are only two genders (men and women). This would allow for other possibilities other than “*promotion of the heterosexual nuclear household ... as the only possible locus of survival for poor people*”.<sup>36</sup> These two examples are just some of the ways in which colonial experiences continue to influence inter-group inequalities.

The need to address the structural underpinnings of inequality was recognised in gender-focused development programs in Latin America which included research using an intersectional lens.<sup>37</sup> Research with female program participants found that: “*the struggle of indigenous women is not only about culture, ethnicity or*

*race, class, or gender, but is about all these and more*”.<sup>38</sup> Importantly, the women involved wanted to change, but not reject, their culture. The research underlined the long-term nature of change in social and gender hierarchies that are rooted in cultural norms, which can be in conflict with the short-term funding cycles typical of development projects. The findings suggested the need for joint work by researchers and practitioners to progress what intersectionality means for policy and practice, and genuinely grapple with the multiple factors perpetuating inequalities. Similarly, programs in Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea (PNG) showed how the application of gender and disability intersectional lenses to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programming can achieve more sustainable and equitable access to WASH. By addressing exclusion and power imbalances it offered scope for WASH programs to be transformative, facilitating deeper and wider changes that could benefit those most in need.<sup>39</sup>

## (iii) Methodological gaps and complexity

Intersectionality is critiqued for not having an agreed method or methodology<sup>40</sup>. Rather, there are varied analytical approaches, each foregrounding different aspects,<sup>40</sup> which have mostly been used in research studies rather than in development practice. To date there has been little practical support offered to development practitioners on how to apply an intersectional approach, or how to integrate an understanding of intersectionality into development practice.<sup>41</sup> It is widely accepted that intersectionality presents opportunities to guide more nuanced consideration of identities, however, the complexity of identifying who is the most marginalised and why should not be underestimated.<sup>42,43</sup> The challenge consists in crafting methods able to capture “the complexity that arises when the subject of analysis expands into multiple dimensions of social life and categories of analysis”.<sup>44</sup> Such

thinking recognises identities as multiple, fluid, relational and dynamic, and rejects the idea of a stable essential identity.<sup>45</sup> Some authors suggest development practitioners should not avoid intersectional analysis due to its complexity, but endeavour to better understand the power relations and multiple identities that shape people’s lives,<sup>46</sup> and thereby make better programming choices. To do this, analytical approaches are needed.

## Analytical approaches: theory and practice

Whilst there is no consensus on how to carry out intersectional analysis, what makes an analysis intersectional is a way of thinking about the problem of “sameness” and “difference” and its relation to power.<sup>47</sup> When applying intersectional thinking, Matsuda encourages us to ‘ask the other question’. For example: “When I see something that looks racist, I ask ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’”.<sup>48</sup>

Analytical frameworks have been offered by Choo and Feree<sup>49</sup> and Winker and Degele.<sup>50</sup> Choo and Feree outline three ways of understanding intersectionality in practice: system-centred, group-centred and process-centred. Meanwhile, the multi-level approach of Winker and Degele analyses the interactions of categories of difference (and associated power relations) at the “anticategorical, intracategorical and intercategorical levels”, terms which are described below.<sup>51</sup> Grunenfelder and Shurr<sup>52</sup> have adapted these frameworks for international development practitioners (Table 1). All three analytical approaches place power relations at the centre of the analysis, and highlight the complexity that exists within and between social groups to both better understand, and deconstruct, the categories used to label those individuals and groups.

<sup>40</sup> Some quick definitions: methods (ways of doing something according to a defined plan); methodology (theoretical underpinning for understanding the application of particular methods); analytical approaches (the way of investigating an issue or problem).

**Table 1. Summary of intersectionality analytical frameworks by Choo and Feree, Winker and Degele, and Grunenfelder and Shurr.**

Understanding intersectionality in practice: analytical framework adapted from Choo & Feree <sup>53</sup> for sociology research	Intersectional multi-level analysis adapted from Winker & Degele <sup>54</sup> for researchers and practitioners	Conceptual framework with three-step model by Grunenfelder and Shurr <sup>55</sup> for development practice
<p><b>System-centred</b> Views intersectionality as a complex system, adopts a methodology that sees everything as interactive (rather than a simple ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ explanation) and looks to identify the local and historical inequalities specific to the context under study.<sup>56</sup></p> <p><b>Group-centred</b> Places the perspectives of those who are multiply-marginalised, and the groups themselves, at the centre of the research.<sup>57</sup></p> <p><b>Process-centred</b> Places primary attention on context and comparative analysis of the interplay between different structures of power, investigating how these intersect in order to reveal the structural processes organising power in society.<sup>58,59</sup></p> <p><b>How framework was used:</b> Using four existing qualitative studies that analysed multidimensional inequality, Choo and Feree apply the analytical framework described above. Their findings drew attention to the comparative, contextual, and complex dimensions of sociological analysis that were missing in the four studies, even when race, class, and gender were explicitly brought together. The four studies take class as the central intersectional issue, but also incorporate other intersectional aspects including race and gender.</p>	<p><b>Anti-categorical complexity (against categories)</b> Focuses on the ways in which concepts, terms and categories are constructed, with a focus on difference rather than identity. Delves into the meaning of terms, concepts and categories.</p> <p><b>Intra-categorical complexity (within categories)</b> Focuses on “particular social groups at neglected points of intersection”<sup>60</sup> and uses case studies, ethnographic and narrative research methods to understand the interaction of different categories of inequality at the micro level.<sup>61,62,63</sup></p> <p><b>Inter-categorical complexity (between categories)</b> Makes “strategic use of categories and analyses the relations of multiple inequalities between socially constructed groups”.<sup>64</sup> The relationship between categories is highlighted with this approach and quantitative research is usually (though not always) applied.<sup>65</sup></p> <p><b>How framework was used:</b> Researchers conducted a study on the everyday coping strategies of unemployed people and proposed eight concrete steps for analysis. All the steps are required in the context of an intersectional analysis, but their order can be changed and the steps repeated. The 13 narrative interviews carried out were differentiated in terms of age, social origin, gender, sexual orientation, child responsibility, nationality, ethnicity, work experience, physical capabilities and so on. This method facilitates a systematic approach that takes identity construction as its starting point, but also considers how categories are interrelated and influenced by the power structures within which individuals live.</p>	<p>This model draws on concepts presented in the other two analytical frameworks and shows how intersectionality can be used as an analytical framework to analyse multiple identities in development programming.</p> <p><b>Step one</b> involves a reflection on how a development program uses (or intends to use) categorisations of inequality during different phases of the project (i.e. during fundraising and then the identification of target groups in the field). This first step ensures that the use of categories is made visible and the boundaries of the different categories identified are questioned and tested.</p> <p><b>Step two</b> explores the ways in which people position themselves and others during interviews, group discussions and in everyday life. This entails being attentive to the ways certain identities or categories are silenced within groups.</p> <p><b>Step three</b> involves exploring relations of multiple inequalities between socially constructed groups, and giving attention to the interactions between different structures of power, in order to better understand the power contexts within which development practice and research takes place.</p> <p><b>How framework was used:</b> Researchers conducted a study in a village in Pakistan and used the above model to understand how the villagers mobilise (or choose not to mobilise) particular aspects of their identities (such as gender, caste, education and class). Data was collected by qualitative methods, including formal and informal interviews, group discussions, participant observations, and participatory learning and action (PLA) techniques (such as participatory mapping).</p>

## Intersectionality and WASH

What does this mean for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) research and programming? In designing development interventions that endeavour to “leave no one behind”, “do no harm” and reduce inequalities, it is important that practitioners, policy makers and researchers are aware of the debates on intersectionality, to inform good practice and contribute to the growing evidence base. Some of the questions related to intersectionality that ISF-UTS and partners will explore through the Water for Women research project *Gender in WASH: partnerships, workforce and impact assessment* include:

- If and how can working with gender equality organisations (not limited to heterosexual, cisgender men and women but inclusive of sexual and gender minorities) support WASH organisations to address power structures that lead to multiple levels of marginalisation, in order to contribute to broader progressive and inclusive social change?

- What are key structural factors, including relevant legislation, policies and cultural norms affecting gender parity and the lived experiences of people in that workforce? What are barriers and enablers for all women including with disabilities) and people of all genders to be part of the WASH workforce?
- How can issues related to intersectionality be addressed within the design and sampling approach of a multi-dimensional index that seeks to assess the impacts of WASH programs on gender equality, and equally, in the design of appropriate qualitative methods?

In addressing these questions, we hope to support the WASH sector’s engagement with, and use of, the concept of intersectionality, so as to ensure the voice of those “multiply-disadvantaged” individuals and groups are placed at the centre of programming, and that the structural factors that give rise to inequality and oppression are effectively challenged.

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