

# Why Intersectionality Works

By Susanna George

**T**he World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), Xenophobia and Related Intolerance provides a unique opportunity for activists to redefine and refine their analyses of human rights.

Various forms of discrimination have been defined and denounced as violations of the universal principles of human rights, but an intersectional approach in the WCAR will examine their multiplier effects.

The proposal of an intersectional approach to understanding racism or sexism is not new. It has long been part of the dialogue of feminists, both in the North and the South. The cross-cutting nature of race, class and gender has been raised in examining the nature of the women's movement particularly by feminists of colour in the North. Similar analyses have been applied by feminists in the South in pressing for more gender-sensitive approaches to development policies within their national contexts.

Feminists have been the first to confront conventional approaches to understanding human rights through the assertion of women's human rights. At the Vienna Conference on Human Rights in 1993, a strong global feminist advocacy campaign managed to estab-

lish women's human rights as a part of the universal human rights framework. The assertion of a gender perspective in all aspects of international and national policy, treaty making, and governance has decisively changed the landscape.

## Caught in "traffic"

The International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the document that lays down the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of race, is gender blind. It defines discrimination as "distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference on the basis of race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin." In order to rectify this, the ICERD Committee expounded a General Recommendation (no. 25) on Gender-Related Dimensions of Racial Discrimination that states: 'Racial discrimination does not always affect women and men equally or in the same way.' (Para 1).

To discuss how the gender-related dimensions of racial discrimination can be incorporated in the WCAR process, the Division on the Advancement of Women (DAW) recently held an experts' meeting in Zagreb, Croatia. The intersectionality approach, based on a paper prepared for UNIFEM by Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw of the United States, was proposed during that meeting.



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Intersectionality goes beyond just looking at the gender aspects of racial discrimination. It seeks to provide a tool for analysing the ways in which gender, race, class and all other forms of identity and distinction, in different contexts, produce situations in which women and men become vulnerable to abuse and discrimination.

In her paper, Dr. Crenshaw pursues the analogy of a traffic intersection: race, ethnicity, gender or class are the avenues of power that define the social, economic and political map. These are the routes through which “disempowering dynamics” travel. These avenues, or axes of power are sometimes considered distinct from each other. But in reality, they overlap and cross each other, and operate in relation to each other, resulting in complex intersections at which two or more of these axes meet. Given the strong manifestations of patriarchy in most societies, women’s experience of racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination are compounded by gender-based oppression. To take the analogy further, women are most often vulnerable to the heavy traffic at the intersections of these axes of power.

### **Systematised violence**

The intersectional approach to understanding and tackling systems of discrimination is crucial. Let’s take the trafficking of women from the South to the North for various forms of work. To treat this as merely a function of gender discrimination, while ignoring the

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racial, ethnic, geo-political and class dimensions of the problem would ultimately result in a flawed analysis of its causes, effects and possible solution. It is important to determine, for instance, why women from certain nationalities and from certain segments of their society make up the majority of workers in the North’s sex industry. Their risk and vulnerability to abuse of syndicates, gangs, police harassment and such, arise not just because they are women but also because they are poor and powerless in their respective homelands. Such powerlessness could be traced to culture, colour, creed and ethnicity.

Non-governmental organisations have documented many aggravated

forms of discrimination involving women in the Asia-Pacific region as a result of the intersection of race, religion, caste, ethnicity, nationality and other identities and distinctions with their gender. This, however, does not preclude the possibility that in some situations, men, young and old, are targeted because of these same intersections with their gender.

The most apparent ways in which gender becomes a liability to men is in cases of police and military brutality, especially in situations of armed conflict. There are many instances where men of certain religious, ethnic, and racial minority groups, or from socially oppressed communities such as the Dalits of South Asia, are targeted by police brutality as a direct result of the intersection of their gender with other identities.

At the same time, there are documented incidents of how women of certain racial, ethnic and minority groups are also targeted in gender-specific ways, such as rape and sexual torture, in situations of armed conflict, police detention, and other similar encounters.

Violent manifestations of racism, xenophobia and intolerance are the most visible ways in which we recognise discrimination. Feminists have long described violence against women as a tool used by those in power to maintain hierarchies of patriarchal power. The subjugative power of violence is used systematically in racialised situations to



maintain an atmosphere of fear and intolerance, where those who are in the minority, or those who have been targeted racially or ethnically, are given painful reminders of their realities.

For instance, the violence experienced by the Dalit communities, particularly women, in India in the hands of upper caste Hindus is a manifestation of their continued denial of human rights.

In Indonesia, the Chinese minority community in the urban areas were not only targets of looting, arson and beating but the rape and murder of Chinese women, mostly by members of the Indonesian military. Violence of this nature must never be discounted as momentary rage, but rather a systematic assault on human rights by those intent on maintaining social hierarchies that favour their own communities.

### **The interactive impact of discrimination**

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At the recent United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) meeting in New York the intersectionality of race and gender was

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recognised and recommendations were made to have this concept included in the WCAR deliberations. However, this was not reflected in the five-year programme of the UNCSW; there was no indication that such an approach was going to be adopted internally.

Yet it is important to develop this framework of analysis since it provides a more accurate description of the experiences of women in different situations.

Gender-based oppression is so wide-spread and structural in South Asia, for example, yet cases of violence against women from a particular religious or ethnic minority is often just described as an attack against that community. Such incidents are not examined as attacks against women based on their race and gender.

In the South, discrimination against women and men from

marginalised communities are viewed solely on the basis of a development paradigm. Many rural poor families and communities, including indigenous communities go to the urban areas in search of work and find themselves living in slums and working in menial, sometimes dangerous jobs. The development paradigm sees their vulnerability to violence and abuse from the police on the basis of their caste, ethnicity, religion and other factors.

### **Roots of inequality**

The current geo-political inequalities between the rich nations of the North and the impoverished South are inherently racist and xenophobic. This relationship has been shaped by the long history of colonisation—the economic, cultural and social plunder by countries of the South by the North.

Colonisation was made possible not only because of the North's military and nautical might as well as unsurpassed greed, but because of its illusions of racial, cultural and religious superiority. Similarly, the slave trade of Africans to the colonies of Europe was founded on this same racist ideology.

This geopolitical reality is reflected in the way international treaty bodies and globalised trade and commerce reinforce the hierarchies between colonisers and colonised countries. Current patterns of globalisation mirror the unequal power relations between countries of the North and countries of the South, whether they be in the area of

finance, commerce or media.

History has, of course, proven that Northern hegemony is made possible with the help of rich collaborators in the South. It is interesting to note that present-day collaborators are direct descendants of colonisers (particularly in countries colonised by Spain and Portugal) or the ethnically or racially dominant classes.

The North's hegemony in international relations is often mirrored in the hegemony of certain elite groups that represent nations of the South. While many countries of the South have come prepared to talk about the unequal power relations between North and South, few are willing to examine the ways in which internal dynamics at a national level give rise to severe forms of racial and related forms of discrimination.

On the other hand, the poor in the North fall into the racial/ethnic categories of the disempowered—the formerly enslaved, or colonised countries.

It is, therefore, essential that all international processes, institutions and systems are examined from an intersectional lens that factors in the history of colonisation and enslavement, and the current unequal power relations at a global level.

The cultural hegemony of the North over the South that is imposed through goods and products, through educational systems, and through the

media, is not a matter offering choice, but of perpetuating colonial symbols and hierarchies. The cultural oppression and “shame” experienced by colonised countries when European culture, values, and religion were foisted upon them still manifests itself today in the cultural, political and social interactions that occur between people at all levels. For instance, it is not simply convenience or choice that compels diplomats of the South to enter negotiations in international conferences and meetings wearing suits and ties alien to their cultures. The subtext has been that the European dress code is superior in diplomatic circles.

### WCAR and intersectionality

The Women's Caucus has been lobbying that the Draft Durban Declaration and Platform of Action include intersectionality as an approach in tackling discrimination.

The effort has not gained much support largely because government representatives and some NGO activists have not had a lot of exposure to intersectionality; it remains an abstract concept for them.

On the other hand, there are those who resist because drawing easy conclusions about victims would no longer be possible when an intersectional analysis is applied. Things won't simply fall into neat North-South, Black-White categories.

Being a Southerner, Black or

woman, does not spell victimisation in every instance; the degree of victimisation is affected by the context one finds oneself in. A high-ranking UN staff from East Africa once described an experience where she was approached in the basement laundry room of her exclusive apartment by a white woman who was looking to employ a cleaner. At that moment, she was viewed purely as a racialised, Third World subject; she was stereotyped as a Black maid in the eyes of her white co-apartment dweller. However, in her home country, she is viewed as a woman of extremely high status, one who is from the dominant ethnic class.

The listing of “victims” in the WCAR documents spells out the ways in which discrimination occur, and makes it harder to reiterate the notion of an intersectional approach. Different NGO lobbies are pressing hard for mention of the particular communities or groups of people as a way of strengthening their anti-discriminatory advocacy in their home countries. It is inevitable that this would happen.

But alliance building across the various Caucuses is important so that the document will not only secure commitments from governments and international agencies like the UN, but will also provide a more integrated and holistic approach to upholding human rights for all. ♡

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