

Feminist Movements and Gender Politics: Transnational Perspectives on Intersectionality

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality has received widespread attention in recent years; in both discursive engagements by scholars and empirical application in diverse fields of health and development. Despite its growing popularity, and two and half-decades since its origin, the concept continues to be mired in critiques concerning its universal applications, gap between theoretical production and empirical application, and its tendency to capture debates on gender inequalities.

Using some of these critiques as a starting point, in this paper we reflect on 'southern' perspectives on Intersectionality and review its contribution to feminist theory and politics in a globalising world. Directly informed by our ongoing engagement with the concept and analytic framework of intersectionality, we synthesise recent developments in intersectionality theory and discuss its potential for opening spaces to locate differences in the women's movement(s) and the political projects they advance. Reflecting on some of the contestations and debates held within the women's movement, we then discuss the potential added value of

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an intersectionality informed feminist analysis for understanding experiences of oppression and advancing feminist scholarship and politics.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Feminist Movement, Transnational Perspective, Global South, Caste, Gender, Inequities

1. INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality has received widespread global attention in recent years; in both discursive engagement and empirical application in diverse fields of health and development. While it has gained significant popularity amongst feminist scholars, intersectionality has also been subject to diverse interpretations and contestation. Two and half-decades since its origin, the concept continues to be mired in criticisms around its universal applications, gap in theoretical production and uptake or empirical application, among others. These contestations played out most recently in India in a debate on intersectionality triggered by a paper by Nivedita Menon in 2015 which, in effect, was a critique and rejection of Intersectionality for feminism(s) of the global South.

Using the core arguments and objections raised by Menon and other scholars contributing to this debate (John, 2015; Nash, 2015) as a starting point, this paper reflects on ‘southern’ perspectives on Intersectionality and reviews its contribution to feminist theory and politics in a globalising world. Directly informed by authors’ ongoing engagement with the concept and analytic framework of intersectionality, the paper attempts to synthesise recent developments in intersectionality theory and discuss its potential for opening spaces to locate differences in the women’s movement(s) and their political projects. In doing so, we draw on our engagement with the analytic framework of intersectionality and its application to feminist informed equity research (via a series of consultations²) as well as our past and ongoing involvement with women’s movement struggles.

²All authors were involved in conceptualising and organising the following events: (i) Workshop on "Learning to do health equity research addressing multiple axes of inequalities". 13-14 August, 2015; and (ii) Consultation on Conceptual and methodological challenges in studying the intersections of gender with other social inequalities: implications for health equity research, 11-12 September 2014. Both these were organised by the ‘Gender’ sub-theme group of “AROGYAM” (Advances in Research on Globally Accessible Medicine), an Indian- European Research Network Scheme, led by the University of Edinburgh and involving partners at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi), the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies, Sree ChitraTirunal Institute for Medical Sciences and Technology (Trivandrum), and the University of Heidelberg. The first author is also the Chair of an international network on Gender, Rights and Development, which hosted a roundtable on transatlantic feminist perspectives on Intersectionality on 25 April 2016, involving many Intersectionality scholars and critics.

2. SUMMATION OF CRITIQUES

Nivedita's piece rests on three core arguments, which we summarise here: first, what she eloquently describes as 'imperialism of categories', whereby certain universal categories, often defined from a 'western' perspective, are increasingly imposed on non-western ways of understanding the world. Second, popularity enjoyed by intersectionality must be seen in light of its endorsement by United Nations and other agencies and their agendas, which as argued in Carbado *et al.* (2013), threatens or neutralises the political project it aims to address. Ironically, in this argument, there is an implicit acknowledgement of the political and subversive potential of the concept. Third, Menon questions the utility of intersectionality for India (and other post-colonial states in Global South) where women's movement have a long-standing history (and politics) of engaging with multiple-identities. The identity of 'woman' in India- the presumed subject of feminist politics- Menon argues, has never been fixed and "destabilised... by the politics of caste, religious community identity and sexuality" (2015, p. 38).

Other critiques of intersectionality centre on its applications and methodological challenges; notably whether all identities are intersectional or only multiply marginalised subjects have an intersectional identity. While some feminist scholars insist that intersectionality refers to all subject positions (which are all fundamentally constituted by the interplay of race, gender, sexuality, class among others), majority of intersectional scholarship has centred on the particular positions of multiply marginalised subjects. This unresolved theoretical dispute makes it unclear whether intersectionality is a theory of *marginalised subjectivity* or a *generalised theory of identity* (Nash, 2008: 9–10 italics added).

This paper is structured around three main sections: First, we briefly introduce 'intersectionality', its historical roots and describe its longstanding genealogy of examining intersections. In articulating the different meanings and understandings triggered by an intersectional framework we offer preliminary explanations for resistance and challenges to its wider application. Second, we locate intersectionality in the interstices of the politics and binaries of the Global North and the Global South. Here we argue that the case for intersectionality is strengthened by a feminist agenda that has been defined as much by feminist politics of the 'West' as by the resistance and politics of social movements in the South. We illustrate this using examples from contemporary developments in caste politics and feminists' attempts to critique and de-stabilise gender binaries. Third, we examine what intersectionality

can offer to feminist politics and its potential for enriching the rather nascent body of feminist equity research.

3. INTERSECTIONALITY: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality encompasses “a cluster of theoretical positions, which seek to revise the view that our social relations are experienced as separate roads” and reject the attempts to reduce people and their lived realities to one category at a time (Kapilashrami *et al.*, 2015; p. 5). Such rejection allows for visiblising multiple positions “that constitute everyday life and the power relations that are central to it” (Dhamoon, 2011; p. 230).

The origin of the ‘concept’ may be traced to a particular black feminist critique of the ways in which mainstream feminism (that was inherently white) and race movements (that were evidently patriarchal) had historically ignored the intersections of race and patriarchy (Crenshaw, 1988; 1991). It is specifically rooted in Crenshaw’s argument that legal discrimination against black women can only be understood if we appreciate that their experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism experienced by them (Crenshaw, 1989). While the language of ‘Intersectionality’ has become popular since the early 1980s, elucidated through the metaphor of intersecting road to explain the ways in which gender and racial discrimination compounded each other, proponents of intersectionality have constantly reminded us that analysis of the relationship between multiple interrelated modalities of difference has a more longstanding genealogy. There is widespread recognition that intersectional analysis was a feature of various social struggles including, as Dhamoon (2011) and others reinforce, feminists struggles against racism, colonialism and slavery. Mary John presents a compelling account of intersectionality references that date back to the 19th century writings and activism, tracing its roots in collective struggles against colonialism and heteronormative patriarchy (See John, 2015). Further, scholars and activists have in recent decades broadened intersectionality to engage a range of issues, social identities, power dynamics, legal and political systems, and discursive structures in both global north and south. It is beyond the scope of this paper to present and evaluate different delineations of intersectionality. However, one particularly useful description by McCall (2005) compels us to perform analysis at multiple levels to challenge assumptions and stereotypes about categories “women” “poor”, “disabled”, “dalit”, “drug users” and reveal which structures of inequalities enable or limit possibilities. Arguing for a more complex understanding of identity, social position and inequality in the social determinants of health, such analysis towards an ‘inter-

categorical' account of social location, enables us to recognise differentiation without reifying social groupings – thus encouraging a focus on social dynamics rather than social categories (Kapilashrami *et al.*, 2015). Notwithstanding these, we concur with Dhamoon and Hankivsky's observation that despite broad take-up elsewhere little attention is paid by researchers and advocates of equity to the breadth of the theoretical developments and applications of intersectionality in the field (2011, p. 17).

We now move to this precise gap in the limited engagement with intersectionality. The shortfall in such an engagement can be attributed, only partially, to the fuzziness of the concept or its 'misinterpretation' (John, 2015). Here, it is important to first establish that as new modes of thinking about questions of health, livelihoods and experiences of discrimination and violence surface, the paradigm of intersectionality has evolved and embraced complexities in making sense of lived realities from multiple social locations³. This, we argue, is the very strength of this analytic framework, as it evokes different meanings (and distinct purposes) for those occupying different positionalities according to their location in the global system; activist, researcher, scholar (or other). To this effect, intersectionality is a constantly evolving framework, subjected to different interpretations and applications over the years. It is simultaneously referred to as a concept, theory or cluster of theoretical positions (Kapilashrami *et al.*, 2015), heuristic and analytical tool (Dhamoon 2011), methodology, research and policy paradigm (Hankivsky, 2011; Hancock, 2007).

While some scholars have tried to reduce this gap in engagement with intersectionality informed analysis, it is worth registering Hankivsky's observation: namely, that there is a risk that intersectionality in inequalities research remains operable at surface level, perhaps as a semantic device in policy discussion, but without a substantive reconfiguration at the analytical level. Another way of characterising this problematic is to follow Yuval-Davis's concern over a 'conflation or separation of the different analytic levels in which intersectionality is located, rather than just a debate on the relationship of the divisions themselves' (Yuval-Davis, 2006; p. 195). It is to these delineations that we now turn.

4. SITUATING INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE INTERSTICES OF THE POLITICS OF GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH: A TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

³Two edited volumes that advance the conceptual and methodological debates on intersectionality include: Summer 2013 issue of *Signs*, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory, guest edited by Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall; and Hankivsky, O. (Ed.). (2011). Health inequities in Canada: intersectional frameworks and practices. UBC Press.

A key ground for scepticism over or rejection of intersectionality, argued in Menon's paper as well as noted in discussions held in the three workshops, is tied to its western roots and an uncontested universal application of imperial concepts to explain complex realities in particular geo-political contexts.

However, if we take into account theoretical developments and applications of intersectionality, it becomes apparent how these understandings are as much shaped by (and applicable to) struggles to challenge domination by patriarchy and caste (a distinctively 'southern' construct) as by western understandings of race and patriarchy. This point is clarified in a recent paper that examines how the case for an intersectional perspective is made more compelling by advancements in contemporary scholarship reflecting feminist 'political desires' from both the global North and South (Kapilashrami *et al.*, 2015). Authors argue that a leap in advancing the analytical frame of intersectionality, towards anti- and inter-categorical understanding of gender intersections, was made through feminists' attempts to overcome gender binaries to develop a nuanced analysis of how power operates at the intersections of multiple structural positions alongside confronting male hegemonic power. These attempts have a long history and include feminist critiques of the orthodoxy in earlier understandings of gender differences based on male and female binaries and its (irr)relevance to contemporary globalised societies and changing labour markets (See Annandale and Hunt, 2000; Walby, 1997; Gandhi and Shah, 1991; Menon, 2009; Anandhi, 2009; Geetha and Rajadurai, 1998; Banerjee *et al.*, 2012).

Likewise, interdependencies of caste, class and gender were brought to fore in early 20th century in B R Ambedkar's seminal speech on *Annihilation of Caste*. In his analysis, Ambedkar highlights how controlling women's sexuality (through practices prescribed by *brahminical* patriarchy such as child marriage, enforced widowhood and sati) becomes quintessential to maintaining the caste system. These intersections are further exposed in the works of Chakravarti (1993, 1998), Velaskar (1998, 2010), Rege (1998, 2013) and Guru (1995) who reiterate the tenuous relationship between women's issues and the caste question. Earlier, in 1992, Gabriele Dietrich in her essay "Dalit Movement and the Women's Movements" criticised the mainstream women's movement's blindness to the caste dimensions of violence against *Dalit* women and its tendency to frame it exclusively as a gender issue. Like Rege (1998) traces the rise and assertion of *dalit* women's movement as a direct response (resistance) to their exclusion from two important social movements of the 1970s; the patriarchal *dalit* movement and the women's movement with its *brahminical* middle class bias. In doing so she

implores for a *dalit* feminist standpoint that establishes the “imperative for feminist politics to historically locate ‘difference’ in struggles of marginalised women” (Kapilashrami *et al.*, 2015, p. 13).

More recent works emphasise the heterogeneity of the caste system and the social group of ‘dalit’ with additional hierarchies of sub-castes, geo-political, ethnic and linguistic differences, and locate these in transitions brought about by “changes in state formation, economic and social relations, greater assertion of caste identity in politics, and legislative and constitutional changes” (*ibid.*, p. 13). Work by Mangubhai (2014) acknowledges this fluidity and embraces a more nuanced approach to analysing caste based inequalities at multiple levels- experiential, institutional and inter-subjective - to offer insights into how systems of caste, class and gender construct privileges and deprivation of livelihoods and health resources, shaping the experience of different women and men.

In presenting the above account, we agree with Menon that a particular delineation of feminist politics in the ‘global South’ has been critical of the “single axis framework” engendering a politics of engaging with multiple identities (mainly of class, gender and caste). In fact, we argue that these works make a substantial contribution in advancing the intersectional paradigm and its application. However, as also illustrated by Gopal (2015), the above developments offer only a partial and nebulous account of feminist movements and historic struggles in India (or from the global South). Here, it is important to remind ourselves that a nuanced *problematic* of gender (including questioning the very category of ‘woman’) has not percolated activism, policy and research agenda in the region; and deep divisions within and across social movements persist. Drawing on two authors experiences as part of the autonomous and non-autonomous movements, we examine these divisions to illustrate particular utility of the intersectionality framing.

5. CONTESTATIONS WITHIN THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS: WHAT THE INTERSECTIONALITY LENS MAY OFFER TO FEMINIST POLITICS?

The early 1990s saw the emergence of a number of autonomous dalit women’s organisations as a response to the ‘*brahminism* of the feminist movement and patriarchal politics of dalit politics’ (Rattanpal 2015). These include the National Federation of Dalit Women formed in Delhi in 1995, the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women’s Movement in 1997, the Dalit Women’s Network for Solidarity (DAWNs) in Bengaluru in 2006, and more recently, the All India *Dalit MahilaAdhikarManch* launched in 2014. A number of Muslim women’s organisations also

emerged during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, and coalesced into two major movements for Muslim women with slightly varying organising strategies: The Muslim Women's Rights Network (MWRH) and the *Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan* (BMMA).

Critiques from these movements go beyond 'exclusion' of Dalit or Minority women's issues from the agenda of the mainstream women's movement. In fact, there is widespread recognition that the mainstream women's movement has taken on board issues faced by Dalit women and women from minority communities. What was being contested was the absence of Dalit women and women from minority communities among the leadership of the mainstream women's movement. Such invisibility also translated into, what these movements regard as (and challenged) the hegemony of the mainstream women's movement in the creation of theoretical knowledge. A statement issued by DAWNs challenges the existing stereotype of Dalit women as doers/activists who have little to contribute as thinkers and defines the Network's role as one of articulating the Dalit women's own vision of emancipation and building their own praxis and theory (Stephen, 2009).

The treatment of women from minority communities as entities who will be defined exclusively by their religious (or other) identity ignoring their other positions (and multiple oppressions they face) is well illustrated in this statement of, well-known woman activist, Flavia Agnes:

"... The women's movement treats upper caste Hinduism as the norm and treats women from minority communities as representatives of their respective groups."

(Agnes, 2008 in Kirmani, 2009).

Nearly a decade since these observations were made, there appears to be little movement forward in terms of recasting 'women's' issues from a plurality of vantage points and an acknowledgement that gender plays out differently depending on one's many intersecting identities.

Further, several vibrant and challenging discussions held within the autonomous women's movement on in/exclusion of *hijras* and queer identities, and contentious positions navigated in campaigns for women's reproductive and sexual rights, lay bare the highly contested nature and terrain of feminist politics. Women's groups have been criticised for their historical silence on sexual rights outside heterosexual rape, treatment of 'lesbian issues' as

distinct from 'women's issues', and limited representation of and engagement with those working with alternative gender and sexual identities. Sharma and Nath (2005), for instance, point to the widespread belief among the members of the mainstream women's movement that discussions on sexuality are appropriate only for privileged classes and contexts. In their analysis of the response of progressive movements to issues of same-sex sexualities, they also highlight the absence of a discourse that locates non-normative sexualities within the larger analysis of patriarchy. Thus, what emerges as a significant gap in the social and political mobilisation within women's movement is a proactive articulation of a women's right to her sexuality and recognition of how sexuality is used to construct and maintain other inequalities in the realm of gender, caste and religion. Sharma and Nath (2005) also offer a critical reflection on identity-based politics, mainstay of most political organising around sexuality, for its potential for creating hierarchies of oppression, whereby behaviours and appearance inconsistent with 'available identity categories' is seen with suspicion. In this last thesis, they make a compelling case for the adoption of intersectionality to advance the social justice and transformative intent of same-sex politics.

Similar contentions appeared in the mainstream health movement, criticised in its early years for relegating women's issues to reproductive rights and campaigns against contraceptive and other technologies; secondary to the macro analysis of political economy of health⁴. The limited visibility of disabled people's experience in mainstream health policy debates, statistics, and activism, and near invisibility of its intersections with food security, land rights, livelihood/employment or sexuality struggles underscore the need for moving beyond *silos*.

Spaces to express these contentions and redress exclusion have been numerous (e.g. debates on domestic violence bill and HIV/AIDS legislation, coordinating committee meetings of autonomous women's conference, coordinating committee meetings of autonomous women's conference and the people's health movement). For instance, following intense discussions, the organising committee of the 2006 National Conference of Women's Movements included "Challenging divisiveness, affirming diversities" as one of the themes in their call. The call specifically sought support for women doubly marginalised because of their

⁴Here, we do not suggest that members of the mainstream health movement lacked an appreciation of intersections that produce inequities. However, in practice and owing to a number of factors not least the adverse geo-political environment, such appreciation did not inform analysis and activism on health for all, nor were attempts made to build synergies with other progressive movements. Moreover, within the women's health movement while the focus was on campaigns against contraceptive and other reproductive technologies, the very terminology of "reproductive health and rights" was criticised as this reduced women to their wombs. Women's grassroots organisations working on health on the other hand continued to advocate for expanding reproductive services, influenced by the needs on the ground for better abortion services and contraceptive services.

identity, e.g. dalit, religious minority, disability, and "lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and sex workers". Likewise, feminists have critiqued the new Surrogacy Bill for restricting conditional surrogacy to married Indian couples, thereby violating fundamental rights of single women and gay people and discriminating on the basis of nationality, marital status, sexual orientation or age. This positive trend mirrors developments in feminist scholarship. In the last decade there has been more substantive engagement by feminist scholars with sexuality studies. From questioning the silence around sexuality (John and Nair, 1998), to discussions on sexual desires (in contrast to a primary focus on 'violence') and non-normative and marginalised sexualities, (Menon, 2001, 2009; Azim *et al.*, 2009; Roy, 2013) feminist scholarship has come a long way. Yet, as Legg and Roy (2013) argue, the critique of heteronormativity is limited to discussions on queer issues and identities; not extended to (nor mainstreamed in) scholarship on gender and patriarchy.

Furthermore, critiques of the politics of exclusion have been few and far between, proving insufficient to create a robust analysis of multiple intersections with structural inequalities that percolates deep into the ethos and practices of women's groups and development organisations. Failure to recognise differences shaped by other identities and structures of oppression risks solidifying the divisions created within the feminist movement on the basis of age, sexuality or caste, and further marginalising or excluding women who do not adhere to specific imagery and conceptualisations.

Intersectionality on the other hand challenges the primacy accorded to singular categories (such as "women" or "poor") and emphasises the ways in which differences work through one another to affect individuals or socially marginalised group. It rejects the possibility of universalising women's experiences, making it a valid means of enquiry into what drives inequalities in an ever changing geo-political climate and with what effects; or to analyse social stratification as a whole.

Thus the added value of intersectionality for feminist scholarship and politics lies in:

- i) moving beyond concepts of double or triple burden faced by women to examine distinctive ways in which productive and reproductive roles are shaped for different women by changes in macro and micro political and economic environment. To illustrate this point further, an intersectionality informed gender analysis of the changing labour market will allow for a differentiated analysis with respect to women's specific location at the intersections of diverse social structures. This would potentially

expose the (ir) relevance of public-private dichotomy for working class women, and how middle class women's gains in the productive sphere (i.e. availing opportunities arising in the formal paid employment sector) implicates the public-private dichotomy experienced by women from lower classes or caste and expose them to further subjugation. What these also highlight is the limitation of the category of 'gender' in labour market, and the need for formulating feminist theory that brings to light the dialectics of social exclusion and power play. Thus, a theoretically informed account of intersectionality compels us to critically reflect on feminist theories and core concepts from the standpoint of difference, thereby bringing together multiple explanations and accounts on inequality while simultaneously allowing us to see how our own positionality shapes our understanding (Mohanty, 1988)

- ii) its core thesis that identities and multiple axes of social locations constitute each other and interact in ways that are not simply additive. We illustrate this with an example of health care seeking, mainly utilisation of reproductive health services in rural Western Uttar Pradesh. Here, the experience of a *Dalit* migrant woman accessing health services cannot be understood simply by her gender experience and her experience of being *dalit*. The experience of being a woman itself differs for dalits and non-dalits, i.e. gender (and prescribed norms and behaviours) can be constituted differently by cultural meanings, policies and institutional practices and aspects of historical violence and discrimination. Likewise, as we know, 'dalit' as a homogenous category has limits and needs to be stratified for livelihood, class, migration status, and be understood in the context of economic globalisation, and changing relationship between the State and its citizens. In essence, the simultaneous operation of structures of oppression make the experience at the intersection of these structures qualitatively distinct. Acknowledgement of these 'southern' categories and contexts is becoming a foci of some more recent work, both qualitative and quantitative (Mangubhai, 2014; Iyer *et al.*, 2008; Velaskar, 2010) allowing us to discuss privileges and disenfranchisement experienced at these intersections.

An intersectionality informed feminist analysis thus allows for understanding how experiences of oppression are not homogenous but contingent on historical and socio-cultural realities.

It further helps us to understand how a variety of oppressions can intersect, thus aiding political activism. Indeed, like other concepts such as 'gender mainstreaming', patriarchy, the

term intended as a call to action runs the risk of being co-opted and flattened out into yet another box to check, without producing any actual change (Paterson 2015). While not denying the potential for depoliticisation through the various institutional lives that intersectionality has taken, we argue that both feminist politics and the wider research and policy agenda on inequalities can only gain from a more nuanced appreciation of the ways in which class, caste and other systems intersect with the global political economic forces to produce different experiences and outcomes.

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