Feminism and Racism: A call for intentional and intersectional actions

Learning Brief
Our existence does not devoid us from living out the authentic parts of ourselves, yet to do this requires recognizing and affirming our intersecting identities beyond our gender. We cannot be reduced by racism, we can be uplifted by feminism that represents our true realities.

This learning brief aims to facilitate learning on racism within feminism, and on intersectional feminism as a tool to rectify Western feminism’s exclusionary practice. It highlights the impact on violence against women and girls while attempting to provoke action within the development and humanitarian sector. This document is intended to reach readers who are interested in engaging more critically around intersectional feminism and anti-racism concepts that can be applied and inform current and future work.

To foster dialogue and create space, this learning brief provides an opportunity to delve deeper into terms that impact diverse women and girls around the world.
bell hooks’ famous quote, “feminism is for everyone,” represents a statement that is timeless, intergenerational, and shatters social constructs of gender and misrepresentations of women and girls.

Feminism has been described as political, driven to end sexism and sexist exploitation, and mandated to dismantle all forms of oppression of women and girls. Mainstream feminist movements, often captured by biased media have misrepresented history and favored White women and their realities. They have excluded the rights and interests of women and girls from diverse backgrounds.

Currently within humanitarian and development settings, there are limited spaces for diverse women and girls to liberate themselves from White feminism due to structures, leadership, funding, and other pressures and influences. White feminism or "Western feminism" disregards the struggles and voices of women of color, centers the experiences of White, educated cis women while failing to address and acknowledge the challenges and oppression faced by women of color. White feminism denies White supremacy (the ideology that White people are superior), by positioning women's liberation as universal, disregarding the power and privilege associated with White skin. This form of feminism has historically and systematically excluded and oppressed Black, Brown, and Indigenous women of color. White feminists are cloaked under the tenets of Western feminism that historically and presently operates in exclusion. White feminist conversations, practices, ideologies, and inactions buffer women from dialogue that is uncomfortable, and from engaging in self-reflection and critique of the myriad ways their privilege upholds policies and practices that benefit them more than women who identify as Black, Brown, Indigenous or woman of color.1

1This descriptive language, although not inclusive, is used to describe women who live in the Global North and Global South, across ethnic diasporas, other non-White women, and women who identify as indigenous.

Feminism and racism: Highlighting tensions within feminism, precisely White feminism, and the disregard for Black, Brown, and Indigenous people's needs

Defining White Feminism

'White feminism or "Western feminism" is a form of feminism that disregards the struggles and voices of women of color, and centers the experiences of White, educated women while failing to address and acknowledge the challenges and oppression faced by their counterparts. White feminism denies White supremacy, by ground efforts of women's liberation as universal disregarding the power and privilege associated with White skin. This form of feminism has historically and systematically excluded and oppressed Black, Brown, and Indigenous women of color.'

Feminism is often assumed by default to encompass all women and girls of different identities. - Racial and ethnic-based feminisms are rarely discussed or acknowledged. Recognizing the interplay of feminism with race and ethnicity remains a struggle. This is especially true in relation to centering diverse voices that have the power to transform how funding, programming, research, and other efforts to end violence against women and girls are motivated, steered, and accomplished. The apparent disregard for Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Women of Color has called forth a reckoning of these groups to generate their own values, thoughts, and voice based on their unique experiences. The intentionality of the actions of Black, Brown, Asian, Indigenous and Women of Color collectively and internally to share their truths while also moving beyond traditional Western and White approaches of feminism to combat social constructs such as racism, xenophobia, colonialism, and imperialism..
Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of a society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support racist policies and practices (Racial Equity Tools, 2021).

There are countless examples of how systemic discrimination and power imbalances are embedded in the humanitarian and international development fields. For example:

- when an organization’s board comprises all White women or men, but the population the organization serves represents diverse ethnic groups;
- when communications depicting women’s rights only represent able-bodied women from the Global North;
- the way in which current funding models favor White expertise and organizations from the Global North at the expense of Black, Brown and Asian local experts and organizations.

As Robtel Neejai Pailey argues, the development sector possesses a “White gaze” which assumes “whiteness as the primary referent of power, prestige and progress across the world. It equates whiteness with wholeness and superiority” (Pailey, 2020). According to Pailey, this “White gaze”;

“(...) measures the political, socio-economic and cultural processes of Southern black, brown and other people of colour against a standard of Northern whiteness and finds them incomplete, wanting, inferior or regressive. In essence, white is always right, and West is always best.”

The development field’s roots in White supremacy colonization (using power to control and/or uproot Indigenous people), savior complex (imbalance of power and privilege), and misguided intentions to “do good” continue to influence priorities, decision-making, funding, and efforts when it comes to the dismantling of violence against women and girls (VAWG) (Pailey, 2020).

Together, feminism and anti-racism are intentional lenses of the spectacles we need to end violence against women and girls.

Both feminism and anti-racism are essential and we cannot separate one from the other. Leaving the comfort zones of western feminism and adding in anti-racism is a bold stance. Yet, we also must recognize that we cannot limit our framework to racism, but we must also include understandings of the role ethnicity plays in societies. Ethnicity is based on shared values, beliefs, culture, history and other characteristics that connect a group of people together. While understandings of race and racism resonate more in Western settings, ethnicity may be more relevant for some people, cultures and regions. We must not use these terms interchangeably, nor should we replicate Western exceptionalism in how we think about and address racism in feminist thinking and practice in humanitarian and development work. Reflective practice in relation to how ethnicity shapes the experiences of women and girls can inform new ways of addressing VAWG. It can also shift the way in which recommended practice standards, put forth by the humanitarian and international development community, are applied, and in doing so, transform current practice.
Intersectionality: The theory developed to highlight the intertwined experiences of racism and sexism specifically for Black women

When considering feminism and racism, the concept and role of intersectionality is essential to unpack the oppressive factors that maintain gender-based violence.

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to "denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women” within the context of employment (p. 1244). Crenshaw’s perspectives illustrated how Black women’s experiences were not confined “within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination,” rather through the lens of the intersectionality of racism and sexism in which the dimensions of race and gender coexist (p. 1244).

As race and gender are social constructs, their intersection is shaped also by systemic, structural, political, religious, patriarchal, colonial, and societal norms, which are catalysts for GBV. Similar concepts embedded in the same perspective and analytical lens of intersecting oppressions have emerged in other parts of the world. For example, in Latin America, women protested and spoke out during the #NiUnaMenos movement against their experiences, which intersected with gender, culture, and violence. In other regions, gender neutral language called forth a re-examination of how language around gender can be used for people to gain acceptance through use of appropriate pronouns. These movements emerged from the lived and inter-related experiences of marginalized women and gender diverse people across the world.

Intersectionality is not merely a theory. It is the lived realities for women and girls in their full diversity. Women of color experience different realities from White women, whether they are the majority or the minority in their spaces. The frames of reference that exist in countries, workplaces, and humanitarian and development structures continue to reinforce Whiteness as a goal to be attained, assimilated, or mirrored. Within existing anti-racism movements to counteract Whiteness and the status quo regarding VAWG prevention and response policies, frameworks and programming, we must not fall into disarray and allow our own understanding, application, and experiences with intersectionality to be distorted. Intersectionality addresses the myriad of ways inequities occur and are experienced given one’s race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, abilities, immigration status, and other historically excluded identities, which all operate together and perpetuate violence against women and girls.

Intersectional feminism “centers the voices of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression in order to understand the depths of the inequalities and the relationships among them in any given context” (UN Women, 2020). Centering the voices of women and girls in their full diversity is a fundamental right that is unfortunately not respected in many humanitarian and development settings. The voices of women and girls do not only need to be centered and listened to, but also amplified, accepted, and valued. Humanitarian and international development policies and practices must recognize the multiple and intersecting systems of oppression that impact the lives of racialized women and girls. Efforts to invite localized perspectives and move beyond recruiting elite locals have gained traction. Yet, there remains difficulty in applying the intersectional feminism frameworks at the leadership, operations, programmatic, and staff levels. One organization that is doing this work is Adeso. Adeso notes that “development must come from within, not outside African communities. That it is Africans themselves who must determine Africa’s future, and that while international aid has provided much-needed support, it often falls short of enabling lasting change at grassroots level.”

Localization that is not embedded within an intersectional framework may unwittingly lead to tokenistic approaches. An authentic approach requires intentional collaborative processes that include women and girls’ vision for impact. While respect for local culture is paramount, it does not prevent understanding that the framing of credibility, reverence, and privileges are traditionally reserved for the voices of men. Utilizing intersectional gender analysis can prevent assumptions and generalizations about the communities we serve.

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Adeso is an African humanitarian and development organization changing the way people think about and deliver aid. Website: [Adeso Africa](https://www.adesoafrica.org)
Feminism, racism, and intersectionality within the GBV sector in humanitarian and development settings

For a long time, feminist ideologies have been advertised as a shared enterprise. However, feminist practice within the international development and humanitarian sectors, in particular within GBV prevention and response, has been led by White Western feminist ideology and practices. Through feminism’s Second Wave (the 1960s-1970s), Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous women were alienated from the era’s narrow version of White middle-class feminism. This period of feminist activity, specifically in the West, unfolded at the same time as the anti-war and civil rights movements in the United States. Feminist scholarship and activism during that time focused on equality between White men and White women. It did not offer a nuanced and feminist analysis of the co-occurring issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and historical context/colonialism for non-White women across the globe. As bell hooks states “feminist thought and practice were fundamentally altered when radical women of color and White women allies began to rigorously challenge the notion that gender was the primary factor determining a woman’s fate.” (Hooks, 1984).

The origins of feminist ideology, activism, and resistance as Western concepts have been long contested. Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian feminist writer and activist, puts it best: “feminism is not a Western invention. Feminism was not invented by American women, as many people think. No, feminism is embedded in the culture and in the struggle of all women all over the world.” The resistance and activism by women from non-Western countries against racial, cultural, gender, and class oppression is well documented. Across many societies, women have come together to form networks of support against colonial and patriarchal oppression. In West Africa, among Igbo women in Nigeria “making war” was a tactic used to protest and respond to unfair laws, harms to women in the community, and unjust interference in economic activities by the British, an act that is popularly known as the Igbo Women’s War of 1929. In Egypt, Huda Sha’rawi, founder of the Egyptian Feminist Forum in 1923, led the first women’s street demonstration, the “March of Veiled Women”, to protest British colonial rule.

Decolonizing feminist practice within international development requires historically locating and contextualizing identity, knowledge, and practice. In present times, the two regions aforementioned are often recipients of development and humanitarian assistance, and GBV practitioners must recognize the colonial legacy of international development and humanitarian research and practice, and learn from established forms of resistance to oppression within these contexts. Historically locating experiences and practice dismantle the hierarchy privileging Western knowledge and ideology, paving a path for intersectional and decolonized action.

Prioritizing historical ways of organizing and responding to community needs, and experiences of living at the intersection must become common practice for GBV prevention and response. White feminism has assumed the homogeneity of Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous women across the globe. As Uma Narayan, Indian feminist scholar, argues, these are ideologies based on “essentialist representations of the most marginalized and underprivileged women as the average” (Narayan, 2013). This homogeneous assumption, rooted in colonialism and White supremacy is the very underpinning of the international development sector, and as a by-product, the development of GBV prevention and response methods in the development and humanitarian settings.

The foundations of GBV prevention and response methods within development and humanitarian settings are also subject to racist constructs created by countries in the Global North, often with post-colonial logic, wealth accumulation and abundant resources, positioning them as decision-makers on what Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous people need, how much, and how to deliver this need. Racism is structural and embedded into many aspects of global society, and has profoundly impacted the design and implementation of GBV prevention and response methods. For example, the prioritization of increasing of knowledge of forms of GBV over reducing mainstream Western approaches to combating GBV. Another example is focusing on psychosocial support services rather than economic support for local programs and staff versus expats. These examples, exemplify the lack of thoughtful and survivor-centered GBV prevention and responses within the development and humanitarian settings that focus on the needs of Black, Brown, and Indigenous survivors.

Response to GBV within development and humanitarian contexts must be conceptualized, negotiated, and led by women and girls living with diverse minoritized positioning. Without the inclusion of different voices and experiences, GBV prevention and response will fail to address the unique needs of women and girls who are often left out, and undermine feminism’s core tenet to improve the status of all women.
Addressing GBV as the global epidemic that it is, must make space for a diversity of experience, interpretation, and expression, while also establishing an accessible and meaningful common ground from which diverse women are able to organize, lead, and influence effectively.

Within the GBV sector, intersectionality has become misused and abused as a buzzword, diluted for its political intent to a simple marker for diversity and inclusion with GBV programming response.

Intersectionality, and as a by-product, intersectional feminism, was conceptualized to challenge essentialist and insular perceptions of women's experiences. In the words of Crenshaw, “if we aren't intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, are going to fall through the cracks” (Crenshaw, 1994). When we do not pay attention to the margins, or acknowledge the intersection where the places of power overlap, we not only fail to see the women who fall between our movements, but we also sometimes pit our movements against each other. Returning to intersectionality’s roots to end GBV within international development and humanitarian settings requires a nuanced understanding of the varied experiences of women and girls and their experiences of violence and discrimination. To achieve this vision, GBV practitioners need to equip themselves and their institutions with a solid understanding of intersectional theory and practice, and have the willingness to confront and address their complicity in the process of marginalization and exclusion. Applying an intersectional approach to end GBV calls for self-reflexivity among feminists about their own context, power, position, privilege, and perspective.

Amplified voices: Our stories and narratives on feminism, racism, and intersectionality in work to end GBV

As feminists, we each have our own lived experiences that overlap with our shared experiences as women of diverse identities.

Our voices are at the core of our commitment to ending GBV. Yet, within our communities, workplaces, regions, , close attention is warranted to expand our understanding of intersectionality to ensure that the promises of feminism, anti-racism, and intersectionality are not ignored or minimized. We must look to see not only the applicability, but the modified adaptability of feminism that reflects the women and girls we support. We need to deconstruct perceptions of racism and recognize other representations such as ethnicity or class-related forms of oppression that interfere with dismantling GBV. In regard to intersectionality, there are endless compositions of how this is represented across contexts and it is up to each of us to deeply reflect, engage in uncomfortable and vulnerable but safe discussions, and risk not adhering to standards that are enforced by donors and the mainstream platforms that dictate which forms of feminism are acceptable and forms of intersectionality are valid.
In preparation for this learning brief, COFEM members were invited to share their perspectives on applying intersectional feminism in their work to end VAWG.

Below are selected responses

Please describe feminist approaches (e.g. frameworks, values) to addressing racism and intersectionality in our commitments to eliminate violence against women and girls (VAWG)?

“Ensuring an understanding and combating violence and discrimination through multiple lenses. This means highlighting any social category and not treating individuals as equal and homogenous. It would require considering different socio-economic backgrounds, abilities, sexualities, gender identities, and/or religious affiliations that may make some categories of women and girls more likely to be exposed to violence within their home or community, it could also impact how they access support, both the GBV response services and the social support. The intersecting differences may also contribute further to the ability of the survivors to seek support and sometimes when they seek to support, they may face more discrimination.”

“Intersectionality creates a corrective and expansive tool to help practitioners understand the violence that women who live within intersections, different forms of oppression, are discriminated against or are experiencing violence because of more than just their gender, that is in (1) trying to understand violence, and (2) trying to appropriately respond, and provide support for women and girls and other people who experience violence in the best possible way.”

How do you apply intersectional feminism in your work to end VAWG?

“It begins with epistemology. How do we think about knowledge and the type of knowledge we value and who says it? The thinking of what we know and how we know what we know is the starting place. At [my organization] we recognize that historically, we have only valued specific types of knowledge from specific types of people. The resources we have, books we read, they are always ‘right’. We need to center voices and experiences within knowledge creation and evidence-based practice to ensure that they can be transferred into systems and referral pathways.”

“Liberation is our framework along with the incorporation of equity, justice in our work. We talk about mindfulness, whiteness, and intersectionality; transformative justice – how to reconcile harm that has been caused; we pursue the beloved community of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and radical healing and vulnerability. We reflect on what does it mean to be in community with others and what does it mean to be in community outside of us being Black women, which is inclusive of accountability, acknowledgement of harm, forgiveness, and dignity.”

“GBV taps into education and entrepreneurship, we work with Black organizations (cis and trans) and this must include GBV at the state level, prison, systems that harm Black women; we also use language that is not within the concept of VAWG but also intimate partner violence, dating violence.”

“Using intersectional lenses in the work and collaborating with departments engaged in working with specific categories of the population to explore linkages with GBV work; ensuring the GBV guiding principles are adhered to; some categories of women and girls are more advantaged and protected by their social status, hence working to understand the local context to ensure services are not targeting only the privileged adult women in the community who come from higher class/socioeconomic status; are educated, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, or HIV-; or are affiliated with the majority ethnicities or religions.”

“Through visioning workshops with the women we work with. We triple check with them on outcomes, asking ‘is this what you meant?’ Creating communications strategies with local (women) groups, again asking how do they think knowledge should be shared?”

“Using terms such as hood feminism and womanist; my upbringing was affirming spaces for Black girls…my work is intervention but affirmations and healing;
Trauma happens but we are more than our trauma – finding our balance; coming from a social work space – expanding it from deficit space and seeing how to support and validate people; incorporation of psychology such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization is key and women and girls should have spaces and know you can be other things; An example: girls only spaces such as camp – formative years of being in those spaces of being in Black and Brown only girls spaces; I’ve facilitated girls-only spaces for Girls Scouts; At the research level – I’m at a Black women-led firm consultant work – I’m the youngest person – I’m facilitating with Black women organizations with a 6 month process, to affirm women as well – strategic planning evaluation process and also honing in on vulnerability exercises as adults, transformative justice to address harm and unresolved conflict.”

“Storytelling often ends with a webinar or one quote used in a webinar. This knowledge rarely makes it into books, reports, or things that donors ask for. It doesn’t transfer or integrate into models that we use to create programming, we don’t base it on what women's groups are sharing or on framework or models. Transferring these stories into action is a feminist way of working that addresses GBV.

The ways we utilize the frameworks of feminism, anti-racism, and intersectionality guide how we practice and collaborate with stakeholders to end GBV. Internal personal work has to mirror external work. Within organizations, it begins with assessing the technical and operational mechanisms to decolonize practices; assess for White supremacy, forms of racism, power, and other types of oppression while tackling exclusion that is systemic and discrimination at all levels. Whether activists, scholars, researchers, practitioners, advocates, or communities we are in different stages in the actioning of our commitments to dismantling GBV.

The following actions are for practitioners, researchers, advocates, allies, funders, and laypersons. They are essential for implementing an anti-racist, intersectional feminist approach. They can be adapted for contexts and organizations that design services to serve women and girls.

**BE SURE TO...**

- Respond to and support women and girl-led long-term agendas and strategies feminist movements, rather than short-term projects and initiatives that are tightly bound by rigid activities and outcomes.
- Attend to language and definitions as they relate to violence against women, empowerment, and surviving.
- Spend time with, listen to, and integrate the perspectives of diverse women and girls to process and negotiate how GBV prevention models should utilize concepts local to their communities.
- Make space, mechanisms and infrastructure for diversity, accessibility, collaboration, and local leadership.

**DON’T FORGET TO...**

- Design context-specific GBV programs with direct collaboration and engagement around the needs of and the barriers faced by underserved women and girls.
- Use an intersectional lens not only to understand ‘who’, but also ‘what’ is missing in GBV service provision, ensuring that services are accessible to underserved groups and able to meet their varied needs sensitively and accurately (Michelis, 2020).

The perspectives of these COFEM members demonstrate critical reflection, intentional implementation of feminist, anti-racist, and intersectional approaches to their work, and the ways they reach women and girls.

There are multiple ways in which our commitments align across different contexts. The common threads of adhering to fundamental principles and crafting a feminist, anti-racist, and intersectional approach provides a model to learn from, adapt, expand, work through and live in order to end VAWG. We would like to acknowledge the Black and Brown women members of COFEM who work in the humanitarian and development sectors and the ways that they are questioning and re-imagining these roots, and are a driving force for change throughout the sectors.
• Contextualize approaches to GBV prevention and response within the local context.
• Analyze intersecting inequalities at the local and organizational levels including the workplace and develop action-oriented changes to uproot them.

WHEN WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP...

• Collaborate with locally-led activists, responders, and women's rights organizations.
• Value indigenous knowledge and balancing between 'global best practice' and Indigenous knowledge and skills and avoid the top-down approach.
• Ensure the representation of Black, Brown, Asian and Indigenous women of color in decision-making structures.
• Consider critically how recommending implementing agencies to provide evidence can mislead or influence them to justify GBV prevention and response activities (IRC, 2020).
• Refrain from implementing a set of criteria that are determined by experts, donors, and entities with power to designate who is and is not vulnerable as beneficiaries.

REFLECT ON WAYS TO...

• Be cognizant of how your role can potentially interrupt women and girls’ decision-making processes; they should not feel obligated to participate in research or reports.
• Be sure to understand which power hierarchies you are associated with and how your language and behaviors reinforce forms of oppression that can impact the communities you serve, the colleagues you work with, and your collaborative partnerships.

It will take concerted and long-term efforts to unlearn, and understand the various ways to uphold bias, subjective perspectives or blind spots around feminism, racism, and intersectionality – be patient with the process, engage in self and collective care, and find a supportive community.

As feminists, we understand the impact of language on our work, especially when it is grounded in fundamental principles to end oppression and achieve justice. There are different initiatives, funding, and resources competing for our attention and that can steer how we approach and disseminate information to women and girls who have experienced GBV. We must not remain in siloed areas of interest or on the path of mainstream ideologies of feminist, anti-racism, and intersectionality, we must challenge ourselves to question, observe, learn, and unlearn concepts that are not conducive to our growth and to better serve women and girls. We cannot oversimplify what feminism, racism, and intersectionality stand for, but we must challenge the status quo and engage in movements to critically address all forms of prejudice, discrimination, and other saturated forms of oppression that minimize the experiences of women and girls.

Addressing VAWG, and the host of other challenges faced by countries receiving development and humanitarian assistance must begin with discussing to dismantle structural racism, patriarchal exploitation, colonialist legacies, and the women who lie at the intersection of them.

Through solidarity, strides can be taken to not only support stakeholders, organizations, and those involved in this work, but to stand together as a beloved community, ready to step in and knowing when to step back. We are calling on those who are committed to ending GBV, which will require some uncomfortable processes, incessant (re)checking of one's power and privileges, ongoing reflection of who has and does not have a seat at the table, and why. Advocacy will be necessary as a collective approach that spans across different contexts. Some may be unaware of the depths of power and may benefit from it, yet this does not prevent us from liberating all forms of misrepresented language, concepts, or beliefs around feminism, racism, and intersectionality that has the power to misrepresent the lives of women and girls impacted by GBV. We are called to be more enlightened and collectively act to promote authentic narratives and representations in the field of GBV.
References

Adeso (2022). MISSION, VISION, & VALUES | Adeso Africa


International Rescue Committee. (2020). Opportunities for transformative language within feminist approaches to partnership.


Selected Resources

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

I Was A White Feminist – Here’s How I’m Learning to be an Intersectional Feminist.

White Traitor and Abolitionist – The One Woman Project

White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color by – Catapult

Black Women Radicals

Lila Abu-Lughod’s Contribution to the Feminist Debate in the Arab World

AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

Anti-racism resources for white people

Summary of Stages of Racial Identity Development

Scaffolded Anti-Racist Resources

Koa Beck on dismantling the persistence of white feminism

ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Rafia Zakaria: ‘A lot of white female professors told me to quit’

Rafia Zakaria’ Against White Feminism’ Is An Urgent Call To Action

How To Be An Ally
This Learning Brief was written by COFEM members
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