
*Repoliticizing
Intersectionality: Returning
to its Roots, Addressing
Misconceptions, and
Applying Theory to Praxis*

2026

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PRIMER?

Almost five decades ago, Palestinian academic and activist Edward Said noted how ideas can lose their original meanings as they travel across different contexts.¹

This has happened to “intersectionality,” a term we increasingly see in multiple sectors and disciplines. Like a story passed from person to person, the meaning of intersectionality has shifted — sometimes in ways that move us away from its roots.

However, the term was not always a buzzword. Intersectionality stems from centuries of radical Black feminist, women of color, and decolonial feminist resistance and theorizing, which name their experiences of oppression in their everyday lives. As the term expands across academic, nonprofit, and development spaces, it can sometimes be watered down or depoliticized, like other feminist concepts such as “empowerment” or “gender mainstreaming.” Drifting too far from these concepts’ origins risks losing the political edge they were meant to sharpen.

Today, intersectionality is everywhere, but that does not mean everyone feels confident in its definition, history, or application. As bell hooks reminds us, feminism is for everybody. Our work as feminist activists means creating space for collective learning, open questioning, and growing as social justice advocates with humility and care.

This primer is one attempt to return to the heart of intersectionality. It offers feminist organizations working to end VAWG a resource when theory can feel distant from the realities we face.

The goal is not to police language or ideas but to make intersectional thinking and practice feel useful, relevant, and rooted in collective struggle. When we understand the origins of intersectionality and how to apply it, we can pursue its mission with intention and care, calling us to challenge injustice and envision new ways of living grounded in a vision of liberation.

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

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“Intersectionality is “an analytic tool that investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life.”

~ PATRICIA HILL COLLINS AND SIRMA BILGE.

Intersectionality is a framework that helps us analyze the relationship between the intersections of social locations.⁵ This means that intersectionality examines how oppression and privilege intersect across different identities at both individual and structural levels⁶:

Political intersectionality

refers to organizing and coalition building at the intersection of multiple systems of power, such that the siloed issues of racial justice and gender justice, for example, can pursue “conflicting political agendas” and “marginalize the issue of violence against women of color” (1252, 1245).

Structural intersectionality

refers to access to material resources, such that “the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes experiences of domestic violence...different” (1245).

Representational Intersectionality

refers to how particular groups are “represented in cultural imagery,” and the way in which these representations can reinforce intersectional oppressions (1282).

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“Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separate from each other.”

~ MARIA LUGONES

⁵ Social location refers to a person's position in society based on factors such as race, class, sexuality, caste, and other characteristics. Our social locations shape our proximity to power and how we experience privilege and oppression.

⁶ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–99.

Historically, especially in the United States (US) and other Global Minority contexts, identities such as race and gender have been treated as distinct categories, falsely implying that all people within a particular group have a universal experience. As a result, we have seen harm in spaces dedicated to social justice, such as white dominance in feminist movements or male dominance in antiracist movements. Many movements have neglected the experiences of women of color and other people who sit at the intersection of multiple, subordinated identities due to class, religion, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, language, etc. As Audre Lorde has said, “there is no such thing as single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” When we understand people and institutions in all their complexity, we can find more holistic and sustainable solutions to our struggles.



“Intersectionality can be a field of study, an analytical strategy, and critical praxis.”

~ PATRICIA HILL COLLINS

Intersectionality is applied in multiple ways, including as a:

Field of study:

intersectionality is not born in the classroom; it is born from the struggle. However, intersectionality is also a field of study with a unique genealogy and encompasses a diverse set of debates and terminology that has led to its institutionalization in academia and beyond. While stemming from critical race theory and US legal thought, intersectionality is evident in various disciplines, including psychology, education, and sociology

Analytic strategy

Intersectionality provides a way to think about “the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.” The term has helped us understand, for example, how intersecting factors create and perpetuate the conditions that lead to violence, such as militarism, impunity, or the use of technology. Intersectionality invites us to revisit what we thought we already knew and pushes us to build a new perspective on problems that individuals, institutions, and/or disciplines believe they have already “figured out.”

Critical praxis

Living out intersectionality encourages us to rethink the bounds of our activism, to better understand the interlinked nature of our oppression and privilege, and to work across and within movements and communities. When we show up to our work with accountability and self-reflection, we can build more inclusive and sustainable movements.

⁷See e.g., Bell-Scott, Patricia, and Barbara Smith, eds. *But some of us are brave: All the women are White, all the Blacks are men: Black women's studies*. Feminist Press at CUNY, 1982.

⁸Lorde, Audre. “Learning from the 60s.” *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* 134–144 (1982).

⁹A genealogy is an analytical tool for uncovering historical events that looks beyond a linear, “objective” story to consider emotional and material effects across various perspectives.

¹⁰Cho S, Crenshaw K, McCall L. 2013. Toward a field of intersectionality studies: theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs* 38:785–810, 795.

¹¹Nash, Jennifer C., and Samantha Pinto. *The Routledge companion to intersectionalities*. Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022., 4.

There are six core constructs underlying intersectionality:¹²

SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Most issues of social inequality are caused by the interaction between different forms of power.

INTERSECTING POWER RELATIONS

Analyze power across intersections of systems (e.g., racism, sexism, capitalism and heterosexism), and “domains of power” (e.g., structural, disciplinary, cultural and interpersonal). (32)

RELATIONALITY

Shift from an either/or mindset to one that is both/and.
Experiences of oppression or privilege are shaped by other’s experiences.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Not all contexts are the same, whether within one national contexts or across multiple countries or regions

COMPLEXITY

“Complexity deepens... intersectional analysis” (34)
Complexity requires ongoing analysis of interactions across systems & domains

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Intersectional projects are connected to a mission of social justice

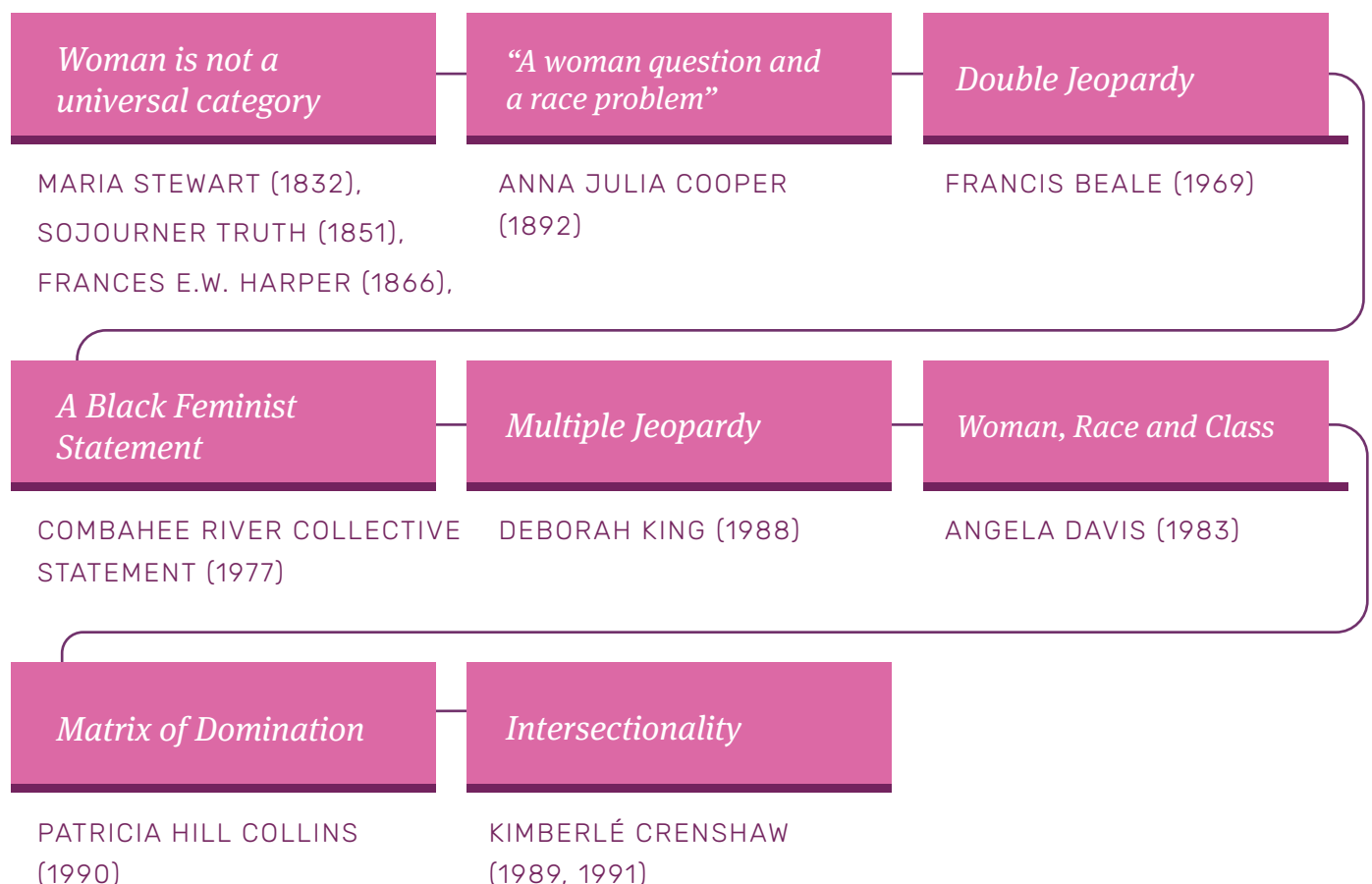
¹²Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. Intersectionality, 31-34.

WHERE DOES INTERSECTIONALITY COME FROM?

As intersectionality “travels” across geographies and institutions, its roots can be easily lost.

Often, people define intersectionality narrowly, starting and stopping with Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar who gave the concept a name. Crenshaw maintains that intersectional thinking was alive long before her “coinage” of the term in 1989 and 1991.¹³ The term’s history is rooted in the experiences of oppression that Black women face in their everyday lives. These expressions were often written outside of academia, especially in universities and other institutional spaces that have—and continue—to exclude women of color. As a result, intersectional work values all forms of knowledge and experiences, encompassing poetry, published papers, literature, music, art, and other forms of expression. Intersectional theory is not built within the academy, but rather by organizers and activists on the frontlines.

Black feminists in the US began thinking about intersectionality as early as 1832. While they may not have used the exact term, their thought laid the groundwork for how we understand intersectionality today. The timeline below illustrates examples of terms or concepts that may not precisely define intersectionality, nor is it an exhaustive list; yet, they collectively showcase a rich legacy of Black feminist theorizing at the intersections of race¹⁴



¹³Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” University of Chicago Legal Forum (1989):139–67; Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.” Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

¹⁴For more on the legacy of US Black feminist theorizing on intersectionality: Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. Words of fire: An anthology of African-American feminist thought. The New Press, 1995.

WHAT ARE THE LINKS BETWEEN INTERSECTIONALITY AND TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISMS?

Women's studies departments in US universities have institutionalized intersectionality; in some cases, this has led to the erasure of transnational feminist theorizing on intersectionality or complementary notions.

In fact, Hill-Collins argues that the familiar refrain of Crenshaw “coining” the term intersectionality in the academy and beyond is rooted in “Western narratives of colonialism and capitalism,” whereby some forms of knowledge are privileged over others depending on factors such as geographic location, academic credentials, and others.¹⁵ Centering Crenshaw’s “coinage” not only ignores the rich theorizing she has done on the concept beyond 1991, but also risks overlooking the contributions of those who may not have had similar access to mainstream institutions for popularizing the term.¹⁶

In 1873 India, Savitribai Phule and the Women Activists of Satya Shodhak Samaj applied what Desai and Roy call “intersectional coloniality.” The group used poetry to explore the “intersection of caste, class, and gender within the context of colonial power” and address both colonial European and pre-colonial Brahminical legacies.¹⁷ In 1987, Nigerian feminist Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie described the cultural, political, and economic situation of “African Women” through a metaphor of six “mountains” upon African women’s backs, including “outside oppression” from foreign, colonial institutions through colonialism; “inside oppression” of tradition in pre-colonial African structures, racism, patriarchy, and women’s own negative self-image.¹⁸ Satya Shodhak Samaj and Ogundipe-Leslie never used the word “intersectionality.” Still, their intersectional analyses were evident as they aimed to highlight the intersecting structural factors that led to oppression and violence in their respective contexts. They are likely not referenced in historical readings on intersectionality, which can sometimes disproportionately center experiences from the Global Majority.

The “pitting” of transnational feminisms and intersectional theory against one another risks erasing the rich legacy of transnational solidarity among women of color.¹⁹

TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISMS

Transnational feminisms are framed explicitly in contrast to global feminism and imperial feminism, which have pushed forward gender as a single or primary axis, disregarding race, class, capitalism, and imperialism. On the other hand, transnational feminisms seek to understand how power operates within and beyond borders in “scattered” forms, from the local to the global. Transnational feminism looks to build coalitions across feminist networks and movements while also being attuned to “multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions.” xii

¹⁵Collins, Patricia Hill. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. doi:10.2307/j.ctv11hpkdj; 123

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Desai, Manisha, and Rianka Roy. “Intersectional Coloniality in 19th Century India: The Sociological Praxis of Savitribai Phule and the Women Activists of Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seeker Society).” *The American Sociologist* 53, no. 3 (2022): 395–413.

¹⁸Ogundipe, Leslie. “African Women, culture and another development.” *Présence africaine* 141, no. 1 (1987): 123–139; 129–135.

Intersectionality and transnational feminisms are not in opposition; instead, they are complementary ideas. Transnational feminism and intersectionality are frameworks that “inform theory, politics, and feminist worldviews” by resisting subordination, dismantling hierarchies, redressing violence, and seeking justice.²⁰

Alexander and Mohanty describe transnational feminist praxis as a strategy to build a feminist democracy that resists colonialism and capitalism. Feminist democracy is defined by key principles, including:²¹

EXPLORING how the politics of gender and sexuality shape governance systems,

CHALLENGING UNFAIR SYSTEMS in our everyday lives while understanding the interconnected nature of inequality,

VIEWING WOMEN AS MORE than victims or symbols, but as agents of their lives who are connected to a larger feminist movement,

IMAGINING NEW WAYS of living outside of exploitation or profit, and

CONNECTING THEORY TO PRACTICE by learning from and with movements and organizers on the ground.

Feminist democracy is not just an abstract concept, but it comes alive through the exchange of our struggles and dreams, in hopes of building a more just world.

Through this exchange, an intersectional and transnational lens prompts us to understand how power relations can shift and change, as well as recognize how the choices made by one group of people can impact the lives of those close to home and around the world.²² For example, Black feminist Francis Beale noted how US capitalism impacted people of color both at home and abroad in different ways: the US labor movement involved the exploitation of Black workers and women, while US development policies pursued projects that controlled racialized bodies in the Global South.²³ Placing location at the center of our intersectional activism and research enables us to understand the interconnected struggles in which we live. This is what Adrienne Rich calls the “politics of location”²⁴ or what Jessica Horn and Chandra Talpade Mohanty refer to as “place consciousness,” a term theorized by Arif Dirlik.²⁵

¹⁹Blackwell, Maylei. “Triple Jeopardy: The Third World Women’s Alliance and the Transnational Roots of Women-of-Color Feminism.” *Provocations: A Transnational Reader in the History of Feminist Thought* (2015): 281–91.

²⁰Falcón, Sylvanna M., and Jennifer C. Nash. “Shifting analytics and linking theories: A conversation about the “meaning-making” of intersectionality and transnational feminism.” In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 50, 1–10. Pergamon, 2015.

²¹Alexander, M. Jacqui, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*. Routledge, 2013, xxvii, xxviii–xxix.

²²Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. *Scattered hegemonies: Postmodernity and transnational feminist practices*, 148–150

²³Francis, Beale. “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black And Female.” *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970).

²⁴Rich, Adrienne. “Notes toward a Politics of Location.” *Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980’s: Selected Papers* (1984): 7–22.

²⁵Horn, Jessica. “Looking from the South, Speaking from Home: African women confronting development: Reprinted from *Development* 43 no 4: 32–39.” *Development* 50, no. Suppl 1 (2007): 109–116, 112; Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity*. Zubaan, 2005, 235; Dirlik, Arif. “Place-based imagination: Globalism and the politics of place.” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* (1999): 151–187.

WHY DOES INTERSECTIONALITY MATTER IN OUR WORK TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

COFEM has argued for close to a decade that technocratic and apolitical approaches to addressing VAWG weaken our ability to stay rooted in feminist principles.

When we remove politics from our work, we lose the influence of a politicized, gender-power analysis—one which sees violence not as random individual incidents, but as both a cause and effect of intersecting systems of oppression.²⁶ Intersectionality (re)politicizes our work to EVAWG. The concept tells us that violence does not occur in a vacuum but is shaped by systems of colonialism, capitalism, racism, ableism, and more.

Amina Mama maintains that Western feminist strategies to end VAWG can't be copied and pasted to "the developing world," where violence and resistance are shaped by systems of (neo)colonialism and imperialism.²⁷ Although we know that violence is preventable, Mama invites us to consider the politics inherent in our work on EVAWG. "No form of violence against women is absent of structural violence...as no individual acts in isolation from culturally contextualized notions of gender, rights, and expression."²⁸ While VAWG may be global, there is no one-size-fits-all solution: survivors' experiences of violence are shaped by the contexts, systems, and histories in which they live.

Michelis explores how intersectionality has been used by humanitarians working on gender-based violence (GBV). Her research reveals some common misuses, including donor insistence that the concept invites "cost-efficiency" and a reframing of the term to mean "vulnerability, inclusion and diversity."²⁹ As a result, intersectionality has been co-opted, for example, to justify decreased funding as well as claim reverse discrimination against men. "By foregrounding an interpretation of individual diversity delinked from systemic power hierarchies, the language of intersectionality is used here to claim equal levels of vulnerability to GBV for all individuals regardless of their position within systems of social inequality."³⁰ Furthermore, well-meaning GBV toolkits and frameworks can sometimes silo identities, looking at "either" people with diverse SOGIESC, people with disabilities, or women and girls at the expense of looking at the intersections of various social locations. Intersectionality invites us to think with more complexity.

²⁶COFEM. (2017a). Finding the balance between scientific and social change goals, approaches and methods (3; Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence against Women and Girls, pp. 1–8). Coalition of Feminists for Social Change.

²⁷Mama, Amina. "Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence against Women in Africa 1." In *Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures*, pp. 46–62. Routledge, 2013, 60–61.

²⁸Michelis, Ilaria. "'Picked up, misused, abused, changed': Intersectionality in the Humanitarian Discourse on Gender-Based Violence." RESEARCH BRIEF. University of Cambridge (2020). 5, 6.

²⁹Michelis, Ilaria, "Picked up, misused, abused, changed," 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

WHAT ARE SOME FRAMEWORKS WE CAN USE TO SUPPORT OUR INTERSECTIONAL WORK ON ENDING VAWG?

One framework for intersectional analysis includes three approaches:³¹

ANTICATEGORICAL

This approach questions and deconstructs group categories, as life is too complex to create rigid categories.

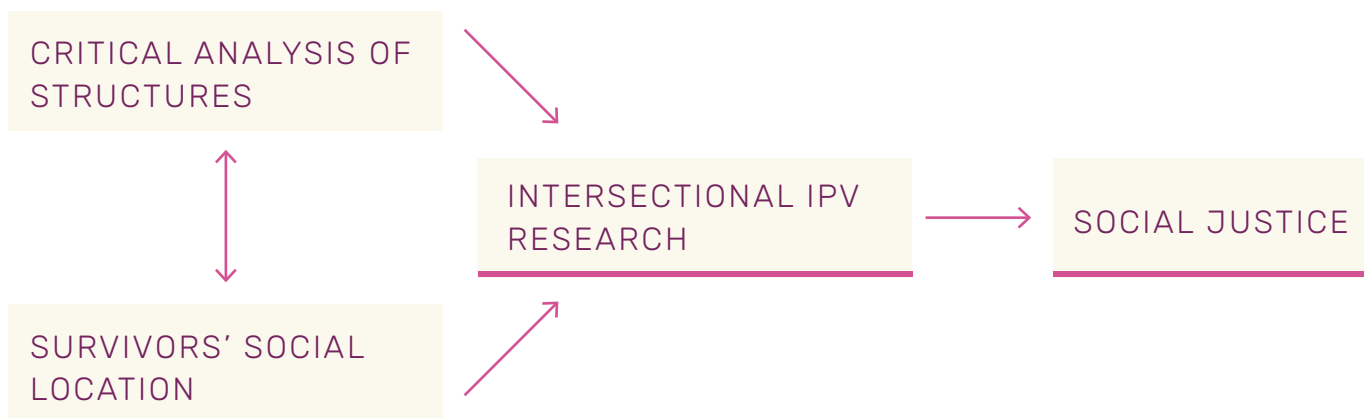
INTRACATEGORICAL

This approach questions the boundaries of social groups by analyzing the complexity within them. This might mean looking within a group of transwomen in Southeast Asia to understand how other systems of power, such as caste, class, sexuality, and disability, intersect with their experiences of violence.

INTERCATEGORICAL

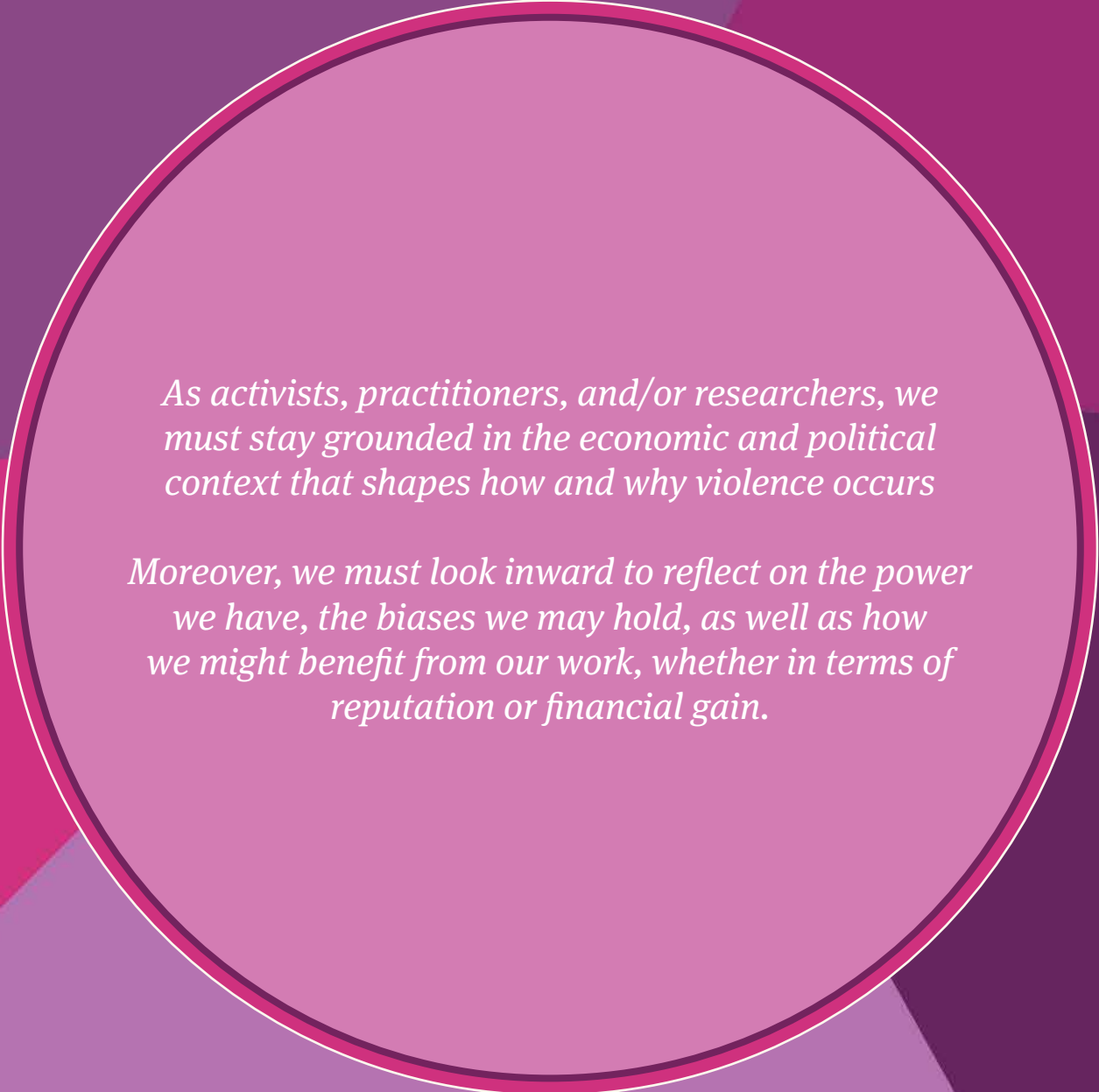
This approach analyzes complexity by comparing social groups. This is the most common approach we see, comparing, for example, violence against people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC) to people with disabilities to those in conflict settings.

Drawing from intercategory and intracategory approaches to intimate partner violence research (IPV) within the Latinx community—particularly in how race interacts with ethnicity—Iris Cardenas put forth a process for conducting intersectional research. The approach examines the interactions between survivors' social locations and structures of oppression or privilege to engage in intersectional IPV research. Given intersectionality's commitment to the project of social justice, the process concludes with applying the research to pursue more just world.³²



³¹ McCall, Leslie. "The complexity of intersectionality." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1771-1800.

³² Cardenas, Iris. "Advancing intersectionality approaches in intimate partner violence research: A social justice approach." *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 32, no. 1 (2023): 1-11, 5.



As activists, practitioners, and/or researchers, we must stay grounded in the economic and political context that shapes how and why violence occurs

Moreover, we must look inward to reflect on the power we have, the biases we may hold, as well as how we might benefit from our work, whether in terms of reputation or financial gain.

A Q&A ON INTERSECTIONALITY:

Q: Is intersectionality a synonym for diversity?

Intersectionality is not a synonym for diversity. While diversity refers to individual identities and representation, intersectionality seeks to understand how our experiences and identities are shaped by systems of power.

Q: Is Intersectionality only about oppression?

Relationality, a key principle of intersectionality, describes how our lives are bound up with one another: “white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do.”³³ A person, for example, cannot be “more intersectional” than another because every human being sits at the intersection of multiple social locations that impact access, struggles, and responsibilities.

Systems of power do not operate in isolation — they elevate some individuals at the expense of others.³⁴

Q: Can intersectionality be critiqued?

Intersectionality is not a perfect theory or praxis. As explained, intersectionality can sometimes be US-centric, projecting frameworks that might make us falsely believe race and gender operate universally. Even the concept of intersectionality is rooted in a US legal framework, which makes specific assumptions about the rights that people have — rights historically tied to the ideas of individualism and property, and thus, whiteness, in the US context.³⁵

Some scholars argue that both intersectionality and transnationalism have fallen short in attending to how power operates within Indigenous communities, especially concerning settler colonialism.³⁶ “Red Intersectionality” draws from a long lineage of Indigenous feminist activists who have been theorizing about complexity, understanding the world outside of binaries, and linking violence against the body to violence against the land for centuries.³⁷ Indigenous ontology,

³³Brown, E.B. (1997). What has happened here. In Linda Nicholson (ed.), *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. New York: Routledge.

³⁴Cooper, Brittney, Lisa Disch, and Mary Hawkesworth. “The Oxford handbook of feminist theory.” (2016): 385, 392.

³⁵See e.g., Harris, Cheryl L. “Whiteness as property.” *Harvard law review* (1993): 1707-1791.

³⁶Falcón, Sylvanna M., and Jennifer C. Nash. “Shifting analytics and linking theories,” 9.

³⁷Clark, Natalie. “Red intersectionality and violence-informed witnessing praxis with Indigenous girls.” *Girlhood Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 46-64, 49.

or how we understand the world, has always questioned concepts of “time, age, space and relationship.”³⁸ Red intersectionality honors local and traditional tribal teachings and intergenerational links by drawing from Indigenous knowledge.³⁹ However, Jennifer Nash reminds us that the evolution of intersectionality is part of its DNA, and critique can be rooted in an ethics of love and care.⁴⁰

Q: Is intersectionality the same everywhere?

Movements across the Global Majority have long been doing intersectional work without necessarily using the same language. Indian feminist Nivedita Menon notes that the “gender-first” approach dominating white, mainstream feminism was never the default in “our parts of the world,” where fluid, political identities shaped by context have always been a feature of feminist struggle and resistance.⁴¹

Vrushali Patil’s concept of “domestic intersectionality” offers a way to consider the unnamed centering of the US, whereby the concept has traveled as it has due to the stronghold of US academia on the rest of the world – intersectionality has not always attended to the cross-border dynamics that shape its usage. “We need to recenter the notion that there are no locals and globals, only locals in relation to various global processes.”⁴²

Q: Can Intersectional analysis be packaged into a “toolkit?”

In global development, intersectionality can sometimes be watered down, turned into checklists, siloed identities, or boxes to tick. When we reduce intersectionality to a buzzword that centers on the individual, we lose its political power. Naming identities such as race, class, or gender is not the same as analyzing how systems such as capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism interact with one another.⁴³ This is not to say that intersectionality can’t be neatly packaged, but instead that we must retain its focus on structural inequalities, politicized analysis, and collective liberation.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid, 50.

⁴⁰Nash, Jennifer C. *Black feminism reimagined: After intersectionality*. Duke University Press, 2018, 58.

⁴¹Menon, Nivedita. “Is feminism about ‘women’? A critical view on intersectionality from India.” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2015): 37–44, 38.

⁴²Patil, Vrushali. “From patriarchy to intersectionality: A transnational feminist assessment of how far we’ve really come.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 847–867.

⁴³Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. *Intersectionality*, 277.

BUILDING AN INTERSECTIONAL MOVEMENT TO END VAWG

Intersectionality was never meant to be convenient or straightforward. It was born from the margins—from women of color's resistance to systems that categorized their social locations as separate or additive. Intersectionality is not a diversity framework, but rather a call to action that politicizes our social justice work. Its widespread use in global development, ERAWG, and even in feminist activism makes it vulnerable to misuse, primarily when it interacts with bureaucratic systems shaped by the very systems we seek to dismantle. To use it with integrity, we must restore its mission to name, resist, and transform systems of oppression in all their complexity. We must hold intersectionality with care, wield it with courage, and refuse to let it be defined by bureaucracies or branding. It is not just an abstract theory or a hollowed-out concept; it is a commitment.

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