



INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

A PRIMER



OXFAM

This primer introduces the concept of intersectional feminism and seeks to serve as a guiding document for Oxfam America (OUS) staff. As part of our commitment to translate intersectional feminism into a sustained practice, OUS has adopted policies, practices, and approaches, including our updated Intersectional Feminist Gender Justice Policy, that guide the way we work and shape our impact.¹ This primer is a contribution to this journey, as it seeks to increase staff awareness and understanding of the relevance of intersectional feminism for carrying out our mission. The work of transforming asymmetric and complex power relations, by working as a feminist-aspiring organization alongside communities facing marginalization, requires not only imagination and rigor but also continual learning and unlearning by doing.

Intersectional feminism is crucial to the work of OUS because of the complexity of the issues the organization engages in with partners and communities. We must increase our ability to make sense of the multiple experiences of gender oppression at the individual, systemic, and structural levels.

This primer supports our understanding and ability to adhere to our internal Intersectional Feminist Gender Justice Policy. Without an intersectional feminist approach, we risk oversimplifying how women and gender-diverse people experience gender oppression. Such simplification would assume that the experiences of women and gender-diverse people are uniform and require a one-size-fits-all solution under the single lens of patriarchy, excluding other systems such as race and class.

While intersectional feminist theory is grounded in the experiences of women and gender-diverse people, its analytical lens can also offer tools to understand how intersecting systems of oppression shape the inequalities and marginalization people and communities face more broadly.

Throughout this primer, we include examples from the literature and Oxfam's work to showcase how we are endeavoring to incorporate intersectional feminism in our work. We invite colleagues, teams, and divisions to explore this document together so we can collectively build practices and processes that help us translate the theory and analytical tools presented into sustained practice.

PURPOSE OF THIS INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM PRIMER

This primer will discuss intersectional feminism in two ways: as a **theory** and as an **analytical tool**. It will thus serve to guide staff both in their thematic areas of focus and in their ways of working.

The objectives of this primer are the following:

- To provide a brief overview of intersectional feminism as a concept, pulling from academic discourse on the term in both US and global feminist scholarship.
- To share *how* intersectional feminism can be incorporated into our work.
- To provide a perspective on why it is relevant for OUS and our way forward.

THE THEORY: WHAT IS INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM?

Intersectional feminism explores multiple and intertwined systems of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism through three core pillars: gender, race/ethnicity, and class. We, the authors of this primer, are deliberate in the use of the term "intersectional feminism" to highlight the connection to feminist tradition and current feminist thinking,² but we understand that the terms "intersectional feminism" and "intersectionality" are interchangeable and hold the same meaning. We are seeking to follow scholars, activists, and practitioners from feminist, women's, anti-racial, and social justice movements in reclaiming the political value and proposition in the use of the term "intersectional feminism."

Intersectional feminism is a “feminist theory and analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. The experiences of marginalization and privilege are not only defined by gender but by other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few—all of which are determined, shared by, and embedded in social systems of power.”

—Oxfam America, Intersectional Feminist Gender Justice Policy, as cited in J. Enarsson, *Re-Politicising Intersectionality* (Oxfam America, 2015), p. 3.

Particularly in the United States, intersectional feminism has been used to name a longstanding debate on the interconnections between women and questions of race and class dating back to African American abolitionist discourse in the 19th century, such as Sojourner Truth’s famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”³

In the late 1960s and 1970s, US Black feminist activists and scholars produced foundational work delving into the intersections of race, class, and gender by developing a critique of mainstream white feminism, arguing that patriarchy and gender oppression were not the only oppression that women experienced.^{4,5,6} As stated in the Combahee River Collective Statement, issued by a collective of Black feminists active in the 1970s:

“The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.”⁷

In her work, social theorist Patricia Hill Collins notes the importance of race, class, and gender and the need to understand them “in relation to one another.”⁸ She also recognizes that these

categories are grounded in systems of power, such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and others.

In 1989, civil rights scholar and advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” when using key US legal cases to examine how Black women were at least doubly marginalized in the legal system by structures of power, privilege, and oppression, highlighting that these multiple forms of discrimination could not be understood separately but only in their intersection.⁹ Building on the work of past Black women scholars and activists, Crenshaw sought to explore “the race and gender dimensions of violence against women of color” but also touched on other axes of marginalization, including sexuality and class.¹⁰ She stated that analyses of racism and sexism commonly left out groups who experience multiple sources of discrimination and thus did not account for the complexity of the experience of the most vulnerable.

Intersectional feminism argues that the mainstream US feminist movement, by tending to privilege the experiences of Northern, white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender women, has largely underrepresented the struggles, experiences, and needs of those from different races/ethnicities, classes, and genders. In response, intersectional feminism calls for a feminist movement that recognizes and addresses the intersecting forms of gender oppression, informed by the core three pillars (gender, race/ethnicity, and class)—and more—identified by Crenshaw and others.

While intersectional feminism stemmed from the activism and scholarship of Black feminists, the term “intersectionality” has resonance among other groups across the globe, highlighting its power and flexibility across borders, as well as the deep-seated need for other communities to name their particular and multifaceted experiences. This is reflected in the thinking and praxis of self-identified Chicana feminists,^{11,12} Native American and Indigenous feminists,¹³ lesbian feminists,¹⁴ postcolonial, transnational, and decolonial feminists,^{15,16} and Marxist feminists, to name a few.

In this sense, intersectional feminists have pointed out that their struggles (as Black women,

Native American women, Chicana women, lesbian women, women from the Global South, and Latin American and Caribbean women, for example) not only relate to their condition as women but are attached to multiple forms of subordination and oppression associated with their race, caste, sexuality, economic dispossession, geopolitical location, immigrant status, imperialism, and environmental degradation of their habitat, among other categories.¹⁷ In other words, categories of oppression and privilege are mutually reinforcing—they do not stand alone; they overlap and interact with one another.¹⁸

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

Audre Lorde (1982)

Note that while there are some areas of contestation between intersectional feminism and decolonial feminism,¹⁹ this primer sees them as interconnected. Intersectional feminism is aware of systems of power and oppression, and colonialism—the main interest of decolonial feminism—is one of those systems.

Considering Oxfam’s work as an international NGO working in contexts dealing with the impacts of colonial experiences, it is crucial that OUS’s understanding of intersectional feminism enter into dialogue with decolonial approaches, including decolonial feminism approaches used across Oxfam’s work,²⁰ current calls to decolonize development and aid,²¹ and to interrogate colonial structures, including US colonial experience and history.²² Connected to this stream of thought, we need to understand how today’s systems of race, gender, and class are produced (or in academic jargon, imbricated) via historical processes.

Intersectional feminism therefore accounts for women’s and gender-diverse peoples’ experiences with patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, and other systems of oppression, helping us to better understand how to recognize unequal power structures

that universalize Western thought and promote racist tropes. It also helps us to interrogate and account for the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) people. Ultimately, intersectional feminism highlights the importance of moving beyond single-axis thinking (that is, considering only one factor or dimension) when analyzing people’s experiences of identity²³ and oppression and instead seeing these systems of power and oppression as multiple and interwoven.^{24,25}

THE THEORY: WHAT IS NOT INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM?

Intersectional feminism occasionally gets conflated with other terms and concepts. This section addresses two major areas of confusion that arise in relation to OUS: inclusion and identity.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM VERSUS INCLUSIVITY

In some cases, actors equate intersectional feminism with inclusivity by adding different types of groups or struggles to the mix. This “add-and-stir” approach does not necessarily involve analyzing how the interactions of these different groups or struggles present unique and particular experiences of systemic gender discrimination, exploitation, or injustice.

Equating intersectional feminism with inclusivity is problematic on two fronts: (1) it separates intersectional feminism from its radical and political history, and (2) it dilutes intersectional feminism’s grounding in an understanding of power.

- **Rooted in history:** Equating intersectional feminism with inclusivity, or using the terms synonymously or interchangeably, removes the radical, political history of intersectional feminism and its connection to US Black women’s feminist thought. It is important not to reinforce whiteness, racism, and colonialism in the discipline by divorcing the origins and history of feminist intersectionality

from Black activist and academic feminists' arguments about why such a concept was created in the first place.

Excluding or ignoring such history waters down intersectional feminism, lessening its powerful ability to improve our understanding of the people and communities with whom OUS works and partners. To consider intersectional feminism as if it were created out of nothing is to perpetuate a silencing of feminist—predominately Black women's—voices.

- **Power at the core:** Although inclusion is important because OUS wants to ensure it is engaging with diverse groups and addressing multiple areas of analysis, intersectional feminism is deeper and more complex. It attempts to understand how women and other gender-diverse groups experience interwoven systems of power and oppression. When inviting people to a meeting, for instance, there is a difference between inviting a diverse crowd representing different identities (inclusion) and understanding the challenges people have faced in their lives when they attend based on their different axes of oppression (intersectional feminism).

In addition, inclusion alone does not attempt to transform systems or structures as it does not necessarily interrogate issues of power and oppression. Therefore, inclusion is the starting point, but it is not enough for an intersectional analysis or intervention, which requires us to see the intersecting axes of these categories and to understand how power, privilege, oppression, and people's struggles present themselves.

INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM VERSUS IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity politics is the idea that people who share an identity (whether based on gender, race, or class) can organize among themselves toward a common goal or goals.²⁶ However, Crenshaw has

criticized identity politics for ignoring intragroup differences and found that "ignoring difference *within* groups frequently contributes to tension *among* groups."²⁷ In her influential piece on intersectionality, Crenshaw recognized this "flaw" of identity politics and saw intersectionality as a way to address other dimensions of the struggles people face by building coalitions joined together by commonalities while appreciating internal differences.

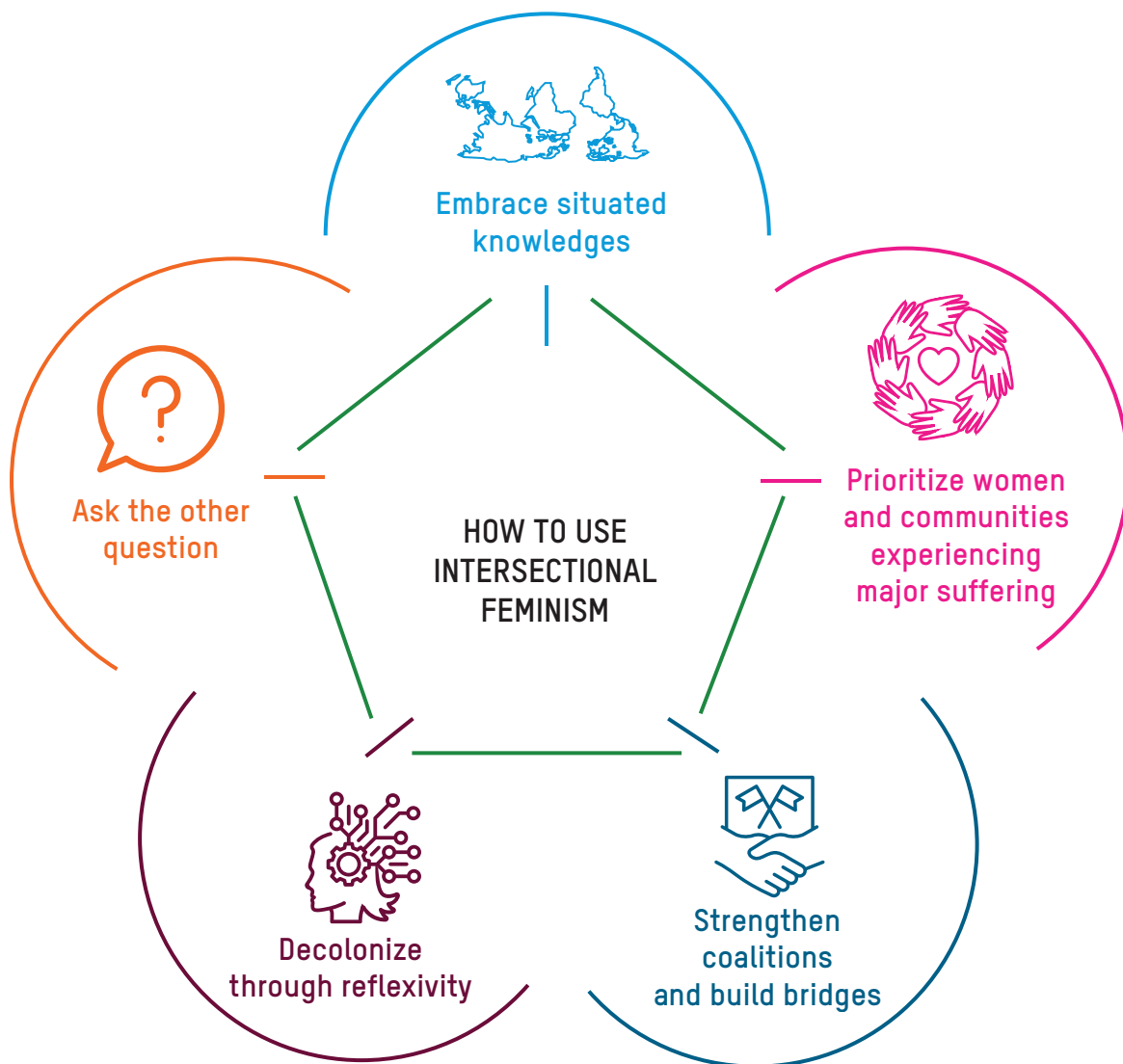
But identity politics does not need to be abandoned. As feminist scholar and social anthropologist Ochy Curiel points out, identity politics have been critical in helping individuals and collectives recognize and reclaim a sense of self that had been lost through racism, sexism, and colonialism.²⁸ Crenshaw points out that the recommendation to avoid identity politics means recognizing that the identity groups into which one self-selects in are—or should be—coalitions as opposed to single-interest, siloed entities.²⁹ Identity politics through an intersectional feminist lens means that "efforts to address one form of oppression takes others [oppressions] into account."³⁰

I am black because racism named me that, marked me that way. I am a lesbian because heterosexism marked me that way. I am impoverished because capitalism impoverished me. Our goal is not to be recognized as different. Our political fight is to end all oppressions at the same time so that people stop dehumanizing themselves or other people.

Ochy Curiel (2021)

THE ANALYTICAL TOOL: HOW TO USE INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

It is important to recognize the importance and application of intersectional feminism beyond the academy, as well as its use as an analytical framework for social justice and as a political orientation. Scholarship on intersectional feminism does not offer a single strict methodology on *how* to use such a concept, so we draw from different approaches in the literature. Below, we have laid out five major suggestions as guidance for putting intersectional feminism into practice: (1) embrace situated knowledges, (2) prioritize women and communities, (3) strengthen coalitions and build bridges, (4) decolonize through reflexivity, and (5) ask the other question. We have followed these suggestions with a few key questions that colleagues can use to kickstart their thinking on how to use intersectional feminism in their work.



EMBRACE SITUATED KNOWLEDGES

The idea of situated knowledges challenges the notion of objective and universal thought by recognizing that all knowledge is shaped by specific social, cultural, historical, and geographic contexts. Critical theory, including feminism, emphasizes that knowledge is always produced from a particular standpoint, reflecting the perspectives, experiences, and biases of the knower.^{31,32} Intersectional feminism seeks to move beyond “the danger of a single story”³³ in feminism, which sees oppression solely through the lens of patriarchy and gender oppression and oftentimes privileges the experiences of white women.

As such, intersectional feminism needs to be informed by contextual nuances and an awareness of the historical and political processes that shape the realities of the most marginalized. As OUS, we need to be deeply familiar with the overlapping struggles of the communities and allies we work with, understanding the root causes and systems that shape their experience of inequality. At the same time, it is important not to generalize these

experiences (or simplify them) and to recognize communities’ agency, knowledge, and experiences as important elements in changing and rebuilding broken systems. OUS should think about how to ensure inclusive spaces and partnerships from the ground up by being part of and learning from local and regional spaces in the Global South (see Box 1 for an example of how Oxfam created such collaborative spaces in Asia). We also need to acknowledge our privileges and power as Oxfam, and as OUS in particular, and be mindful of how we take up space.

Embrace Situated Knowledges: Key Questions

- What are the specific social, cultural, historical, and geographic contexts shaping the realities of the communities we work with and seek to serve?
- How do we acknowledge and address the privileges and power dynamics inherent in our position as Oxfam?
- How can we ensure that our power-sharing approach is culturally sensitive and tailored to the specific contexts of the local organizations we work with?

Box 1. Embrace Situated Knowledges:

Supporting Humanitarian Initiatives for Transformation (SHIFT) in Asia

Oxfam is committed to supporting the local leadership of women’s organizations in the humanitarian sector. Since 2021, for example, Oxfam has supported women’s organizations and leaders in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines as part of the Supporting Humanitarian Initiatives for Transformation (SHIFT) in Asia project, recognizing their deeply contextual knowledge as essential to effective humanitarian action. Embracing the importance of situated knowledges, the project has emphasized that women leaders, as experts on their communities’ needs during emergencies, bring invaluable perspectives that are often overlooked in traditional humanitarian frameworks. By hosting learning spaces at local, national, and regional levels, SHIFT Asia has fostered networks and provided platforms for women to connect, share challenges, celebrate successes, and exchange lessons learned about leadership in the humanitarian sector.

A key insight from the project was that creating spaces for women’s organizations and leaders to convene and collaborate—an opportunity they rarely have—has transformative power. Participants in these gatherings emphasized that fostering women’s leadership must be grounded in community realities and informed by their situated knowledges. They also highlighted the importance of dismantling power hierarchies and building connections across local, national, and regional levels, ensuring that these linkages grow organically from the ground up to reflect the unique insights and lived experiences of women leading humanitarian efforts.

PRIORITIZE WOMEN AND COMMUNITIES WHO EXPERIENCE MAJOR SUFFERING AND STRUGGLES

Intersectional feminist scholars and activists point out that feminist movements must prioritize the needs of women and communities experiencing major suffering and struggles^{34,35} in other words, they must focus on the “lived experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized groups.”³⁶

This notion goes hand in hand with Oxfam’s mission to fight inequality to end poverty and injustice by working alongside underserved communities and its work to offer support in crises and tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality. See Box 2 for an example of how

Oxfam is attempting to integrate this aspect of intersectional feminism into its work based on its research on climate change.

Prioritize Women and Communities: Key Questions

- In the context of our work, who are the women and other marginalized people and communities who experience major suffering and struggles?
- How do we ensure that the lived experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized groups are central to our work?
- How do we support processes that seek to amplify the voices and create spaces for groups of people who have been historically marginalized or criminalized, such as LGBTQI+ people?

Box 2. Prioritize the Women and Communities Most Impacted: Gender Dimensions of Climate Change

In the context of the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) and its resolution to establish a Loss and Damage Fund, the OUS humanitarian team, in partnership with Oxfam International, developed a briefing paper offering a gender and intersectional analysis of climate-related loss and damage in Asia. This paper demonstrates that the impacts of climate change on the lives of individuals vary depending on their gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, and (dis)ability and argues that women and girls from diverse backgrounds offer unique knowledge, experience, and skills to address climate-related risks.

The Oxfam briefing paper advocates for a feminist approach to the newly established Loss and Damage Fund, providing nuanced and region-specific evidence that women and men facing multiple and diverse systems of oppression are experiencing climate change in unique ways and have specific expertise to shape solutions that best address the needs of all frontline communities.

The paper highlights the importance of understanding the greater impacts and risks women face in the context of climate change while noting that women’s problems in relation to climate change are not always the same and that there is a diversity of impacts and of adaptation, resilience, and coping strategies between women that should lead to the development of diverse responses. For example, within the same country context and in the same economic sector, women may engage in different activities that will cause variations in their experiences of and approaches to climate change. Examining climate-related loss and damage from an intersectional gender lens is necessary to ensure women and girls experiencing multiple layers of marginalization play a central role in designing solutions that meet their specific needs.

Source: N. Tewari, A. Bush, M.N. Butt, E. Stevens, and S. Zafar. (2023). *Gendered Dimensions of Loss and Damage in Asia*. Oxfam GB for Oxfam International. DOI: 10.21201/2023.000005. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/gendered-dimensions-of-loss-and-damage-in-asia-621556/>

STRENGTHEN COALITIONS AND BUILD BRIDGES

An intersectional feminist lens requires a coalition-building approach among women’s movements, networks, and issue groups that face different struggles, as noted in the previous section on identity politics. Through such relationships, OUS’s way of operating will better reflect the world it works in and the communities it partners with. Working in solidarity and sharing power with OUS’s partners can “allow for shared insights, approaches, and commitments.”³⁷ OUS should create spaces for mutual learning, co-creation, and shared ownership of strategies and outcomes (see Box 3 for an example of a research collaboration between OUS and a legal services organization on a research report on immigrant survivors of gender-based violence).

Such an approach requires that OUS seek to dismantle false silos between its programs and themes to better allow for collaboration and mutual learning.³⁸ Breaking down these artificial boundaries facilitates a more holistic and integrated approach, one that mirrors the interconnected nature of the

challenges faced by the communities OUS serves. OUS also needs to recognize that there are different feminisms³⁹ and work within and across such diverse understandings.^{40,41} Feminist thought and activism are not monolithic; they emerge from different cultural, historical, and political contexts, each offering unique perspectives and strategies for change. By working within and across these diverse understandings, OUS can build more inclusive and transformative alliances that respect and amplify the voices of all women, particularly those who are most marginalized.

Strengthen Coalitions and Build Bridges: Key Questions

- How can we build bridges between different organizations, networks, and movements that focus on amplifying the voices of those who are most marginalized?
- How do we ensure power sharing and address existing power hierarchies?
- How do we intentionally create spaces for learning and bringing what we learn into our decision-making spaces?

Box 3. Strengthen Coalitions and Build Bridges: OUS Research on Migration, Race, and Sexual Orientation

OUS and Tahirih Justice Center, a national nonprofit organization that works with immigrant survivors of gender-based violence, jointly produced a research report exploring how US asylum and immigration policies shape the gender-based violence (GBV) that migrants and asylum seekers experience at the US–Mexico border. Focusing on the experiences of women, girls, and LGBTQI+ individuals, the report unpacks how US asylum and immigration policies produce differentiated risks of GBV for migrants based on their race, gender, and sexual orientation.

For example, the report finds that the risks of experiencing GBV for migrants while waiting at the US–Mexico border is compounded for Black women, girls, and LGBTQI+ individuals. Black migrants are disproportionately negatively impacted by US asylum policies and consequently face further racial discrimination from other migrants, criminal networks, and Mexican officials. For instance, the study finds that Black migrants face greater difficulties in securing housing and jobs, and Black women and girls are often solicited for sex work while also facing greater scrutiny and violence at the hands of US immigration officials. The confluence of these factors means that Black migrants face a differentiated and compounded risk of GBV compared with other migrants at the US–Mexico border. The research also shows that LGBTQI+ migrants report that homophobia and transphobia are prevalent at the border, increasing the risk of violence for LGBTQI+ migrants.

Source: S. Duvisac and I. Sullivan. (2022). *Surviving Deterrence: How US Asylum Deterrence Policies Normalize Gender-Based Violence*. Oxfam America and Tahirih Justice Center. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/surviving-deterrence-how-us-asylum-deterrence-policies-normalize-gender-based-v-621499/>

DECOLONIZE THROUGH REFLEXIVITY

It is important to consistently reflect on OUS's positionality⁴² and privilege in the course of our work. Though some of OUS's staff may come from the Global South, the organization is nonetheless located in the North.^{43,44} How OUS is situated in Western contexts impacts how it sees the world, so it needs to be conscious of the power it holds, confront any feelings of discomfort, and approach its work with humility and openness in a continual process of learning.^{45,46}

Considering that OUS's work concerns international development, it needs to be deeply aware of how to make sense of the impacts of colonialism on its work as well as the impacts of being a Northern-based international NGO. Decolonizing efforts within an intersectional feminist framework require the organization to examine its work, partnerships, and priorities with an understanding of how gender, race, class, sexuality, and other struggles intersect (see Box 4 for an example of how Oxfam is

working to implement decolonizing policies).⁴⁷ This decolonizing approach extends to how we partner, moving away from top-down subcontracting processes that do not contribute to the sustainability of our partners and moving instead toward relationships rooted in equality and co-production (that is, horizontal relationships between OUS and its partners that tackle inequities and harmful hierarchies).⁴⁸ It also relates to how we communicate about the work we do, the values we hold, and the consistency between these two.

Decolonize through Reflexivity: Key Questions

- In what ways can OUS staff acknowledge and address their positionality and privilege when engaging with partners in the Global South and grassroots partners in the US?
- What do decolonial ways of working and ways of acting look like for our partners?
- What does mutual accountability look like in practice?

Box 4. Decolonize through Reflexivity: Women's Economic Empowerment Knowledge Hub (WEE KH)

In 2020, as part of its ambition to shift power and decolonize its knowledge structures, Oxfam initiated a process of transitioning and transforming its Women's Economic Empowerment Knowledge Hub (WEE KH). Since its inception in 2013, the WEE KH had been hosted by Oxfam Great Britain (OGB) and supported by an active governance group, including Oxfam South Africa, OUS, and Oxfam Novib. As part of the OGB 2020 change process, a proposal was accepted to transition the WEE KH out of OGB and to find a new host in the Global South.

As a result of the process, Oxfam Pilipinas has taken over as the new host of the WEE KH on behalf of the Oxfam confederation. Oxfam Pilipinas champions Southern thought leadership on WEE KH in its hosting role and animates a community of practice on WEE KH that demonstrates and leads decolonizing knowledge in Oxfam. OUS provided thought leadership and committed two years of (and ongoing) unrestricted funding support to ensure a responsible transition and stabilization of the WEE KH in Oxfam Pilipinas. A set of guiding principles that intersected with Oxfam Feminist Principles informed the transition and transformation process to ensure that decolonization was not just theoretical but also operationalized and frequently applied across all teams facilitating the process.

Source: Oxfam. (2020). "The WEE KH Transformation Guiding Principles: The Hows of a Process to Decolonize Our Knowledge Structures." Internal document.

ASK THE OTHER QUESTION

Applying intersectional feminism to OUS's work can create some confusion; OUS staff may think it means we need to include everyone all the time. While including everyone may sometimes be a good idea, this is not always realistic or desirable, and it is also frankly impossible to tackle all issues simultaneously. Choices have to be made, and they need to be grounded in a contextual understanding.

Applying an intersectional feminist approach means understanding what lived realities people are carrying with them and have imposed upon them; adapting OUS's work to such understandings can lead to more targeted outreach and support of people's needs (see Box 5 on how Oxfam brought an intersectional approach to its care work). A useful thought exercise articulated by scholar Mari Matsuda is to "ask the other question."⁴⁹ For instance, when working on an issue where class issues are apparent, it can be useful to consider whether

issues of patriarchy or racism are also involved. When examining gender issues, look to see whether there is homophobia or colonialism. Practicing such thought exercises can help us be more aware of the different realities and issues at hand.

Ask the Other Question: Key Questions

- What additional systems of oppression beyond gender discrimination, such as racism, classism, or colonialism, might be influencing the issue we are addressing, and how can we adapt our gender approach to better respond to these intersecting challenges?
- If we are addressing economic inequality, how might issues of race, gender, disability, or migration status intersect with economic challenges? Or, if we are tackling climate change impacts, how might Indigenous rights, class, or gender identity influence who is most affected and how?

Box 5. Ask the Other Question: Care Work

Across Oxfam, teams working on care-related initiatives, research, and advocacy have recognized the importance of taking an intersectional and decolonial feminist approach to understand how care has been organized in our societies, what strategies have been adopted by families and various care stakeholders, and what impacts care responsibilities have had on women and girls. Studies commissioned and developed in partnership with Oxfam teams have incorporated feminism to shed light on the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity in care work in the US context as well as to explore broader approaches in care-related interventions in Latin America that do not necessarily involve market-related or state interventions.

For example, the US study finds a gender-based disparity in unpaid and paid care work across all racial and ethnic groups, but "women of color often find themselves at the intersection of gender, racial, and ethnic discrimination, which exacerbates disparities in both paid and unpaid work." Furthermore, the study in Latin America highlights the need to acknowledge the connections between the region's current development models (including the organization of care in societies) and its history of colonialism.

An intersectional feminist approach seeks to avoid gender solutions and responses that would reproduce other types of exclusion or exploitation such as racism, capitalism, or environmental deterioration. In the case of care work, the report *Los cuidados en Latinoamérica y El Caribe* emphasizes that social movements, which include urban, territorial, and community feminist movements, have broadened the vision of care work by showing that care represents more than a socioeconomic contribution or a market function but is a central element in sustaining life itself, including its interdependence with the environment and nature.

Sources: A. Jacoby, A. Sen, G. Kelley, and A. Montoya-Boyer. (2023). *Unseen Work, Unmet Needs: Exploring the Intersections of Gender, Race and Ethnicity in Unpaid Care Labor and Paid Labor in the U.S.* Prosperity Now and Oxfam. <https://www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/research-publications/unseen-work-unmet-needs/>; C. Ferreyra. (2022). *Los cuidados en Latinoamérica y El Caribe: Entre las crisis y las redes comunitarias.* Ecofeminista and Oxfam. https://oi-files-cng-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/lac.oxfam.org/s3fs-pub-lic/file_attachments/Informe_Los%20cuidados%20en%20LAC,%20entre%20la%20crisis%20y%20las%20redes%20comunitarias.pdf

WHY DOES INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM MATTER FOR OUS?

OUS has been on a transformative gender justice journey since the inception of its gender mainstreaming and learning initiative in 2007.⁵⁰ Subsequently, the launch of Oxfam’s 2030 strategic framework⁵¹ has solidified its commitment to gender justice, with its confederation-wide adoption of feminist principles (see Box 6) and its strategic priority of nurturing and developing a feminist and anti-racist organizational culture. Gaining fluency on issues such as feminism and racial justice is now a critical requirement for the organization to deliver on its strategy and aspirations. OUS is aware that it cannot approach gender justice, racial justice, and economic inequality issues as separate issues.

Box 6. Oxfam’s Feminist Principles

- Power sharing
- The personal is political
- Feminism is a local-global movement
- Nothing about us without us
- Feminism is for everyone
- There is no economic, social, and environmental justice without gender justice
- Safety
- Care and solidarity
- Development as freedom
- Elimination of all forms of gender-based violence
- Diversity and inclusion-gender mainstreaming and intersectional analysis

An intersectional feminist approach to OUS’s work allows us in practice to update our power analyses to highlight the different ways in which issues beyond gender—such as race, colonialism, or class—exacerbate or shape the experiences of oppression and privilege in structures, systems, and people’s lives.

OUS’s commitment to be an intersectional feminist organization is not new. In 2015, OUS held a symposium on intersectionality and development discourse, producing a series of practice papers that explored the issue of gender and intersectionality within the broader context of international development work.⁵² Ten years later, OUS has updated its gender policy to the Intersectional

Feminist Gender Justice Policy. The updated policy advances OUS in its goal to be a gender-transformative organization and explicitly names the organization’s commitment to feminist principles. Further, the Intersectional Feminist Gender Justice Policy centers gender justice, feminist intersectionality, (trans)inclusivity, and anti-racism in the work OUS does and the way it works.

Through many of our internal policies and union contracts, we strive for ways of working that take an intersectional feminist approach, uphold our commitment to safeguarding and safe programming, and prioritize care for staff. In this way, we move to translate values and principles into policies, processes, and sustained practices. In its campaigns, advocacy, research, partnerships, and programming work, OUS seeks to transform gender power relations and adopt intersectional feminist practices externally and internally. This allows OUS to analyze and understand fully the complex power dynamics that replicate and sustain inequality.

Upgrading OUS’s power analysis enhances our ability to understand the asks from partners, the communities we serve, and the challenges we face collectively. It strengthens OUS’s contributions to the advocacy efforts of our partners and means they do not have to divert their precious energy to help OUS understand the complexity of the issues they face. It allows OUS to collaborate with others at the level required to work together as equals. As such, an intersectional feminist approach to OUS’s work should be understood as a strategic choice to help us remain relevant as an organization and as a partner for others. In addition, Oxfam is engaged in developing and applying a decolonial approach that demands that we identify current power inequalities and the prevalent systems of oppression generated by the colonial project as central to our work.

By embedding intersectional feminism in our analyses and approaches, we demonstrate our shared commitment to addressing systemic inequalities and enhancing the effectiveness and integrity of our shared mission. Embracing intersectional feminist practices is challenging and deeply necessary for our strategic aspirations. It helps us close the gap between the feminist values we embrace and the work we do in all of its breadth and depth. It takes effort, time, commitment, and intentional steps to collectively build this work. Only together can we translate our commitments into sustained practice.

NOTES

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The women of Segei Machesa self help group talking in Marsabit county, Kenya. 2024. ©Shaffi Abdi/Oxfam.

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