

# Framing Questions on Intersectionality

A Resource provided by the US Human Rights Network and the Rutgers Center for Women's Global Leadership<sup>1</sup>

Below is a brief introduction to the principle of “intersectionality”<sup>2</sup> and some framing questions to support your application of the framework in your proposals, presentations, and discussions for the US Human Rights Network's national bi-annual conference, Advancing Human Rights 2013: Dignity. Justice. Action.

## What is Intersectionality?

How do we know the full impact of human rights violations on individuals, groups, communities, and Peoples? How do we ensure that the solutions to these violations include the people who are directly impacted and do not simply reflect the views and experiences of the privileged and the powerful?

An individual's identity has many dimensions. These dimensions, race, gender, age, class, religion, national origin, sexuality, etc. do not exist in isolation. As the term “**intersectionality**” emphasizes, they work collectively to affect our experiences and behaviors in relation to inequality, injustice, exploitation, and oppression. By offering us a means for analyzing how these systems of power and inequality impact individuals, groups, communities, and Peoples differently, as well as how these systems and experiences of discrimination change over time and within different social and political contexts, intersectionality becomes a powerful tool for effectively addressing human rights violations.

As long as people have existed, intersectionality has existed. But, its use as a political tool for analysis, advocacy, organizing, movement building, and developing policy emerged out of the lived realities and the activism of women of color. As a framework for advocacy, intersectionality holds that it is not enough to know that women are discriminated against because of their gender, instead we need to consider other factors such as race, sexuality, gender identity, immigration status, age, Indigenous status, disability, socio-economic

status, religion, and others, to know what type of discrimination different groups of women face. Further, intersectionality requires that we understand that the combination of these factors produce a unique, substantively different experience of discrimination rather than an additional burden of discrimination. For example, Indigenous women's experience of gender-based violence is unique in the United States because of federal policies that, until 2013, did not extend protection under the Violence Against Women's Act to Indigenous women when that crime was committed on tribal land by non-Indigenous perpetrators. As a result, Indigenous women experienced a higher rate of violence from non-Indigenous men, or men outside their ethnic or racial group, which is uniquely different from how other, non-Indigenous women experience gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup> Importantly then, intersectionality calls on us to account for the political, social, and historical realities that impact a person's identity and therefore how the individual and their group experience rights violations or discrimination.

**Intersectionality** is a tool that allows us to think about systemic oppression in a broad context and emphasizes individual's experiences in an effort to understand privilege and power.

## Why use Intersectionality?

When applied effectively, intersectionality is a powerful tool for analyzing and addressing rights violations. Using it to guide our thinking and work means we have to move away from single-issue (e.g., race-only, gender-only, or class-only) and top-down approaches, to

addressing the realities on the ground, as people experience them. Utilizing an intersectional approach means the difference between saving lives and further worsening people's experiences of discrimination. For example, it means proposing solutions that reflect the realities of people—especially of those on the margins and extreme margins, understanding that people can be both privileged and marginalized (e.g., a gay man is able to access privilege as a man but may face discrimination at work because of his sexuality), and recognizing that the solutions need to be driven by and generated from those most directly impacted.

When applied effectively, intersectionality as a tool of analysis, advocacy, organizing, movement building, and policy development calls for the following:

### **A bottom-up, grassroots-based solution:**

Because anti-discrimination solutions often use the experiences of the most privileged members of a group to make a determination (e.g., middle class Blacks and heterosexual Black men when it comes to racism), those solutions often fail to adequately address and sometimes completely erase the experiences of those members of the group that are multiply burdened or those who have intersectional experiences (e.g., Black women, Black gay men, poor Blacks, Black transgender people, undocumented Blacks, or formerly-incarcerated or incarcerated Blacks). An intersectional approach says that solutions must be driven from the bottom up, or from the experiences of the most marginalized, to fully account for everyone (e.g., when it comes to addressing economic inequality, we cannot simply talk about the middle class, we must also address the conditions of the poor and the extremely poor). It also recognizes that there may need to be different solutions to address the different ways people experience discrimination. Across the country, homeless shelters are divided along lines of sex. Due to the violence transgender men and women face in men's shelters, the New York City shelter system began allowing transgender people to choose the shelter in which they feel safest.<sup>4</sup> The measure has reduced the number of transpeople on the street and their experience of violence in the shelter system. Intersectional measures, including this example, are not "special" treatment but specifically appropriate remedies to address the particular discrimination faced by transpeople.

**Cross-issue alliance building:** An intersectional approach demands that we recognize the different types of discrimination as points of overlap or as coming together at a point of intersection. The goal is not to

show how one group is more oppressed than the other, but to recognize where we have similarities and differences in our experiences of discrimination, and to work to build within- and across-group solidarity. For example, undocumented domestic workers, who tend to be overwhelmingly women, fit within multiple categories (undocumented, woman, immigrant, worker), but it is their unique position as undocumented-domestic-workers versus domestic-workers generally that makes them vulnerable to lower wages, harsher working conditions, more demands outside of their job description, *and yet* unwilling to quit or demand fair treatment for fear of deportation or being thrown in jail for being undocumented.<sup>5</sup> It is in their interest to not only build alliance with other domestic workers but with the larger groups of which they are members (immigrants, workers, women, and ethnic or racial minorities).

From my membership in all of these groups [Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother] I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, **there can be no hierarchies of oppression.** I have learned that sexism and heterosexism both arise from the same source as racism.  
-Audre Lorde, from *There is no Hierarchy of Oppressions*

**Systemic, institutional changes:** In addition to analyzing how different forms of discrimination intersect and overlap, intersectionality calls for understanding the political, social, and historical forces that impact a group and subsets within that group. It is not enough to know that Mexican immigrants are uniquely discriminated against within our current political climate. To fully address the issue, it is helpful to understand how that history of discrimination is rooted in larger forms of social and economic controls, and how it relates to and is different from the experiences of Asian, African, Latin American, and Caribbean immigrants, who migrate under different circumstances and at different periods in time. A full understanding of the history of the U.S. immigration system, for example, would lead one to understand its connection to the U.S. slave system, the criminal/penal system, and the fight for workers' rights. Intersectionality, therefore, allows us to see that racism, classism, xenophobia, etc. do not act independently of each other, and in fact overlap and depend on each other. In this way, solutions generated from an intersectional analysis, demand a holistic approach that

seeks to change policies, practices, actors, laws, and beliefs that contribute to discrimination, and thereby

changes institutions and systems.

## **Framing & Facilitating Questions for your Presentation**

Below are some questions to support you in producing a dynamic and intersectional presentation for the conference. Taking into account the issue(s) you plan to address in your presentation, consider the following:

### **Your own position as a presenter/speaker/panelist:**

- What are your own identities, privilege(s), and positions of power in relation to the issue(s) you are addressing? Are you a member of the group? Are you directly impacted by the issue(s)? Do you work with people who are directly impacted?
- How does your position impact your work on the issue?

### **The intersectional identities being presented:**

- What are the specific identities that overlap or intersect to make people vulnerable to the rights violation(s) you are discussing? (e.g., poor Black female; single mother; undocumented youth; rural Latinas; trans-women of color; rural poor; etc)
- Who are the people most-impacted by the issue you are addressing? Are there subgroups and identities within this larger group that go or have gone unnoticed? Have you considered: transpeople, youth, women, the elderly, persons with disability, immigrants, Indigenous Peoples, formerly incarcerated, incarcerated persons, sex workers, et al.?
- Who are the people/groups with power and privilege? Have the groups/people/individuals changed over time? Which groups or identity categories are newly affected?
- What issues have been historically left out of discussions of this rights issue? Why? How would these issues benefit from recognizing their shared or overlapping concerns?

### **The conditions that impact our intersecting identities:**

- What, if any, are the recent policies, practices, or laws in place that cause or worsen the rights violations of the group(s) you are discussing?
- What are the social, political, economic, or cultural conditions that are impacting the groups, people, issues you are addressing? Is this an on-going or emerging issue? Has the intersectional relationship changed over time? How so?
- What are the social, political, or environmental conditions that contribute to making this particular group vulnerable to this or other rights violations?

### **The proposed solutions to the rights violations being presented:**

- What policies, practices, laws, or conditions need to be stopped, revoked, or rescinded to remedy the rights violations you are addressing?
- What combination of policies, practices, laws, or conditions need to be in place to remedy these rights violations from the intersectional perspective you have presented?
- What do we all need to be vigilant of to ensure we do not further contribute to marginalizing this group or groups and to ensure we account for their full inclusion in other areas? What are the power dynamics at play and how should they be accounted for and addressed?

### **Before you close:**

Is there any group of people in your community who are undercounted (or not counted), invisible and whose culture and way of life are rejected and negated by the mainstream society? Who are they? What are their multiple identities - ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious or faith tradition, national origin, citizenship status, or economic and social status? Have you accounted for them in your presentation? Have you made space in your presentation for the existence of such groups, whether or not you know of their existence? Why or why not?

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completing this document. Visit the US Human Rights Network at [www.ushrnetwork.org](http://www.ushrnetwork.org), and visit Center for Women's Global Leadership at [www.cwgl.rutgers.edu](http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu).

<sup>2</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 208. Crenshaw was the first to highlight the concept and method of intersectionality in this pioneering essay.

<sup>3</sup> Indian Law Resource Center, "Violence Against Native Women Gaining Global Attention," *Safe Women, Strong Nations*, <http://www.indianlaw.org/safewomen/violence-against-native-women-gaining-global-attention>, (accessed 11 July 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Diana Scholl, "For Transgender Homeless, Choice of Shelter Can Prevent Violence," *City Limits*, <http://www.citylimits.org/news/articles/4235/for-transgender-homeless-choice-of-shelter-can-prevent-violence/3#.UdRenZxdAwo> (accessed 3 July 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Linda Burnham and Nik Theodore, "Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work," <http://www.domesticworkers.org/pdfs/HomeEconomicsEnglish.pdf> (New York: National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2012).