

## Marginalization of Intersectionality in Mainstream Feminist Activism

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### Abstract

*In our world, history has been an undeniable witness to the rise and fall of empires since before moments and events were commonly captured in manuscripts and stones. Almost all of these have seen varied natures of participation, which include a plethora of behaviors and emotions that comprise of dominance, generosity, cruelty, benevolence, malevolence, love, hate, abuse, revenge, violence, lust, exploitation, and even suppression, with the list continuing alongside the evolution of humankind. On close observation, one may take note of the need for intermittent change, mostly arising at critical moments, as a point of commonality across regimes. More often than not, such changes gain traction from prolonged resistance to existing practices and a deep-rooted sense of dissatisfaction - that sow seeds of coercion and show up as movements and revolutions. Despite the genesis of this pattern being cemented in deeply primal traits, modern humans have not been able to insulate themselves fully, even after monarchical forms of active governance have been virtually discontinued. Historic incidents - where females were forced to witness suppression, abuse and violence – have travelled the same trajectory, and arrived at a juncture where similar patterns are revealing themselves. The chain of such events has now become a movement that goes by the name of “feminism”. This article reviews and synthesizes existing scholarship while laying emphasis on the critical aspect of “intersectional identities” in feminist activism by attempting to highlight its importance, potential, historic challenges, point of genesis and evolution thereof. We believe that there lies a sense of immense power when unity meets with diversity, while remaining confined to the protective realms of harmony. That again, is majorly dependent on a specific set of behaviors which have until now, not helped the ethos of intersectionality in harnessing its hidden powers, that may have otherwise brought tectonic shifts in social fabrics across geographies. Organizations and key initiatives have been trying to inculcate measure to give impetus to a mindset that fundamentally acknowledges the need for this aspect in feminism, with hopes of introducing the much needed behaviors to drive real change in every stakeholder of modern form of feminism.*

**Keywords:** Intersectional Identities, Feminism, Organizations

## INTRODUCTION

‘Femina’ in Latin means ‘woman’ in English. The term ‘feminism’ is believed to have been inspired from here [1]. Though the idea of feminism has its roots in ancient human civilizations, the same has been made to appear seemingly complicated for the masses in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - an age where people are entitled to freely express their opinions. Social media platforms have only given impetus to a lack of clarity and are expected to play a pivotal role in shaping perspectives as we advance into the future. In the West, there have been instances where casual discussions on feminism have transcended into heated debates, with some even going to the extent of questioning as to what a woman might be. Interestingly, political rallies in developed economies became breeding grounds for such discussions and now it is just a matter of time before the trickle-down phenomenon starts showing signs of its manifestation in developing polities. Though many people tend to misinterpret feminism as a movement representing those specifically identifying as / associating with females, this couldn't be further from the truth. It encompasses a much larger support base, for it is a gender-free sociological theory that stands up against the historic challenges and injustices of patriarchy, through proliferation of the common belief of power & status as two major proponents of social inequalities that have led to conflict, oppression, exploitation, socially constructed gender roles and an overall disadvantage of the masses in general [2]. However, it is not incorrect to assume that women in particular have been the forerunners in being at the receiving end of patriarchy for the longest possible duration.

Feminism views the system of patriarchy as a social framework of practices where those associating as males are akin to domination, oppression, exploitation and imposing a rhetoric of evolutionary supremacy over the forerunning victims. The response to this is rooted in the rationale behind a common goal in favor of gender equality, which stems from a generalized belief that all sexes share equality and equity in social, political and economic realms [2]. But some of the women-specific approaches have emphasized upon the recognition of different and unequal experiences as compared to men; the need for ending gender oppression along with tendencies of exploitation and subordination; the desire to promote sexual freedom by eradicating sexual violence (through reconciliation of the fact that women own their sexuality) and the stigmatization of being promiscuous. Over and above these, and most importantly, the focus has also been on ensuring the right of women to have access to safe and secure abortions [2].

Though there is no clear reference to document the beginning of feminism, its evolution is believed to have happened in phases. After extensive research and discussion, social scientists have depicted its progression in four different stages – better known as the four waves of feminism [3]. The first is believed to have originated in North America and Europe during the mid-nineteenth century under the spirit of equality between men and women, when strong demands were voiced in favor of women's education, their leadership and the right to own property. Despite them being reasonable, criticism loomed against the concentration of power and influence among elite, white women, thus opening doors to sexism and classism

against women of color. The second wave started to take shape in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly after the civil rights & labor movements in USA and UK respectively. It was believed to have been more radical than its predecessor. A unique outcome of this phase was the attention that “Black feminists” garnered through their work. Others include the enforcement of legislative acts that ensured equal pay and access equal access to credit, the legalization of abortions in America and the provision of opportunities to engage in non-traditional jobs, which were traditionally dominated by men. The third wave comprised of a younger generation of feminists, many of whom were children of the second-wave-activists, with an added advantage of being privy to the rise of mass media. Owing to their flexibility and tech-based agility, they had incredible influence and were perceived to be less sexually judgmental in comparison with their predecessors. The element of radical diversity - that grew prevalent with the introduction of the concept of “girl power”, a pro-sex narrative in defense of pornography and sex work, and the first traces of intersectionality as a source of unity - differentiated them in many ways. The fourth (and the latest) wave of feminism is believed to have begun in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and having gained massive popularity with the rise of Internet and social media. The famous “#MeToo” movement in 2017 only added to a raging surge of solidarity among women sharing their emotions & experiences of sexual violence, abuse and harassment. As per one view, this is that point in the history of feminism where people could see sexual violence as more of a structural issue than a personal problem. With a rise in the number of women taking part in active politics across geographies, the sexual aspects of feminism have earned their place in political activism, and are expected to grow from this point onwards [3].

Movements on feminism have majorly been centered on the grievances of a relatively elite group of women with Caucasian traits, hailing from middle hierarchies in social strata, while overlooking the experiences of the rest. The latter majorly comprised women of color, hailing from working-classes and LGBTQIA+ individuals [4]. In the history of feminism, the third wave left a serious mark of consideration owing to the introduction of “intersectionality”, which has made it an important focal point in this text. It was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, and is believed to have shaped perceptions on the existence of different individual identities possessed by different women [3]. It started from the exploration of intersections between race and gender – studied in black feminism – and went on to include detailed analyses on class, age, disability and sexuality [5]. This happened after experts attempted to explore its application by giving due consideration to gender, race, class-based interactions with inequalities, studying the ways in which intersectionality may offer chances of discourse, and doing an analysis of the efficacy of intersectionality in social justice beyond academia [5]. Much work has been done in this field, such that it has already become a common sight to see placards with the famous slogan - “IF IT ISN’T INTERSECTIONAL, IT ISN’T FEMINISM” – in women’s rights protests and rallies [5]. Again, Kimberlé Crenshaw was the one to have devised this slogan. Her definition of intersectionality was, **“the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and**

**interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage**”, to highlight the barriers of race and gender for women of color by exposing their combined effect with sexual orientation, on the life experiences of a woman. White women, despite having their own challenges, were the first to receive the right to vote and among the most privileged in the world. They went on to ensure that the right be limited to them in order to uphold white privilege and supremacy, thus subconsciously setting a nationalist and racist narrative in feminism. Of great importance, is realizing the subjective nature of the multiplicity of aspects in a single identity, and that some women within a larger sample space of all women do stand a greater chance of facing unpleasant experiences due to several socio-economic factors. According to Crenshaw, ignoring intersectionality would be the same as ignoring people’s lived experiences [6]. Another way in which she chose to describe intersectionality was, “**a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other**”. This talks about the multitude of the nature of inequality itself [7]. The same is dependent on various parts of one’s identity. According to an assessment [8], intersectional feminism has been one of the most important contributions in gender studies because of the power it places in the analysis of relations between race, gender, social class, migration status, nationality, etc. Even though protections from discrimination have not yet achieved their full potential - owing to lukewarm responses in the past from elite organizations, such as the UN system - the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen UNDP commit to intersectionality by unveiling its Gender Equality Strategy 2022-25 that aims to address coinciding manifestations of gender inequality that lead people to states of deprivation and discrimination [9]. In theory, intersectionality is a powerful attribute as it leaves enough room for diversity to thrive in a larger group that stands united for a strong cause – just as is true for the world’s largest democracy. This text focuses on the steps taken to minimize its marginalization i.e., organizational interventions to stimulate/protect intersectionality in the agenda of feminism.

### **EXISTING MECHANISMS TO EVALUATE & PROMOTE INTERSECTIONALITY**

As per the UN’s latest World Social Report, 2025 – the influential gap between those in power and the ones being governed has increased manifold. Regressive politics has a role to play in affecting vulnerable sections to the greatest extent, alongside tech-discrimination, climate change and economic shocks [7]. Another reason includes the power struggle between majoritized and minoritized groups within feminist movements in relation to the adoption of intersectional practices, where a study has discussed about the ways in which internal dynamics of intersectionality may have obstructed its conversion to practical approaches [10]. Even though the list of reasons has grown over the years, the solution lies in de-marginalizing intersectional identities in feminist activism. Not doing so may render feminism as impotent. As per the analyses provided by McCall (2005), Davis (2008) and Carastathis (2014), one perspective argues in favor of the four benefits to feminist theory - simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity [11], and since intersectionality is inspired from the infusion of racial identity, sexuality, disability, nationality and gender [12], it is important to work towards de-marginalizing intersectional identities using simple and

complex strategies. Some of the ones that can be implemented are: engaging young feminists in political and influencing spaces after due training to give them a deeper understanding of multiple forms of discrimination and the policies that surround it [13]; helping individuals understand and apply practices to enforce intersectionality using standard toolkits such as “Intersectionality 101”[14]; organizing workshops to consider the complex and nuanced dimensions of intersectional oppression and discrimination [15]; working in solidarity through collaborations for realizing autonomous aims of examining fundamental causes of inequality, marginalization, and exclusion [16]; etc.

Even though intersectionality has majorly been considered a tool for qualitative studies of identity and marginalization, its quantitative nature too has a presence across various disciplines [29]. There are standard practices for intersectional statistical analysis, with multiple other methods of cross-tabulation analyses stratifying measures of central tendency by intersectional groups, regression models, etc. in existence as well. According to a study [17], intersectionality is the same as examining an individual's overlapping identities and the relative privileges or barriers that a society (by default) confers to a given intersectional identity. In other words, it is a complex task that is subjective at best. Of the works that have been done towards measuring and promoting intersectionality, three major ones have been briefly described here: i) UN Women Intersectionality Informed Gender Analysis Toolkit; ii) United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS); iii) UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women.

### **UN Women Intersectionality Informed Gender Analysis Toolkit [18]**

As per the details contained in UN’s official text, the toolkit supports centralizing intersectional gender and human rights considerations through legislations, policies and strategies against organized crime, much in congruence with UN’s long-standing convention against organized forms of cross-border crime (Organized Crime Convention), also known as “Transnational Organized Crime” [19]. The implementation of “UN Women Intersectionality Informed Gender Analysis Toolkit” has two parts to it. The goal is to guide with capacity building and knowledge creation for developing appropriate policies and programs that take cognizance of intersectional inequity & discrimination, and using applicable practices to address them. They, along with the methodology have been discussed in the adjoining paragraph.

Part one of the implementation strategy is based on recognizing the fact that there is an intersection between inequality and discrimination, and thus, starts with setting the purpose that is intended to be achieved. This clarifies the importance of intersectionality, throws light on imminent opportunities for the empowerment of women and girls, and assists in a detailed understanding of intersectionality informed gender analysis. It deals with processes that help understand the grounds of commonality between gender on one hand, and age, disability, nationality, ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and migration or refugee status on the other, thus helping with shaping people’s lives and creating differences

in needs and experiences. As per UNHRC, its summit in the year 2000 noted that discrimination against women “is often intertwined with discrimination on other grounds”. Part two deals with operationalizing the gender analysis using three components:

- i) **Building Blocks** – that measure outcomes against baseline information on status-quo by making use of certain principles. It is however, critical to consider the accounting of the needs of diverse groups of women and girls, along with any specific past efforts to prevent intersecting forms of discrimination.
- ii) **Working Principles** – they make use of the following:
  1. Reflexivity – a measure of one’s willingness to reflect on the ways in which their experiences, identities, entitlements and limitations have shaded their overall personality and way of thinking.
  2. Intersecting social factors – analyses must focus on at least three intersecting factors to represent true intersectionality.
  3. Multi-level analysis – a view of how different levels of interaction in a society (macro, intermediate, micro and individual) shape the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions of people’s lives.
  4. Dynamics of power – an analysis of power dynamics from the lens of intersectionality leads to the realization of privileges and oppression of people in different social strata and positions.
  5. Diversity in participation – a drive to include women and girls from groups that repeatedly experience forms of discrimination that go beyond intersecting identities.
  6. Time and space – accepting the fact that personal experiences occur in different spaces, places and times, and are often determined by country, region and geography, socio-political and economic forces.
  7. Social justice and equity – important for understanding gender based inequities
- iii) **Guiding Questions** – are based on focus areas such as demographics, household size, diversity; cross-gender relationships from diverse backgrounds; access to resources; power-dynamics in decision-making; role of social norms; obstacles and barriers (individual, social, economic, legal, political, cultural) experienced; programs and services available to support health and well-being; existing human rights-based policies, etc. In order to avoid biases and incorrect results - data must be examined in a broader context; human rights standards must be followed; privacy needs to be protected; the principle of “do no harm” must be employed; and the text should include disaggregated information about family members.

The steps to conduct an intersectionality-informed gender analysis are as follows:

- i) A team comprising of policy makers, program designers and analyzers is convened.

- ii) The concept of intersectionality is introduced using the toolkit's conceptual framework.
- iii) Key questions provided in the toolkit are used to conduct an intersectional analysis. This is done to determine who is affected by a policy/program. Methods of information gathering must include quantitative (surveys, questionnaires, statistical reviews) and qualitative (interviews and observations) techniques while capturing experiences, and be interpreted within socio-cultural contexts.
- iv) The use of enablers such as creating safe spaces, using diverse forms of knowledge, inclusion of marginalized groups, etc. is beneficial. An enabling environment is one where efforts are supported and valued, and working with an open mind is easier.
- v) Develop a feedback mechanism based on which policies/interventions that highlight intersectional challenges can be created.
- vi) Ensure that the design is put into practice faithfully.
- vii) Capture intersectional outcomes and regularly reflect (reflexivity) upon unintended consequences.
- viii) Iterate policies and revise them.
- ix) Embed the analysis into SOPs and train staff.
- x) Data presentation on intersectional relationships, inequalities and discrimination.

The purpose of the aforementioned steps included in the UN Women Intersectionality Informed Gender Analysis Toolkit cater to understanding the issue, understanding current solutions, thinking through new solutions, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and impacts, and final reflection.

### **United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS)**

The UN Charter is the founding document of United Nations and has seen three amendments since its formulation in 1945. Its purpose and principles guide the mission and work of the organization [20]. Principles in the charter are interpreted to include persons with disabilities while disability as a subject has been dealt with in the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Therefore, securing the rights of those with disabilities reinforces a collective commitment of adherence to the Charter [21].

The UN Disability Inclusion Strategy has two major components, both of which are interlinked to each other. The first is a policy framework outlining UN's commitment and vision regarding disability inclusion, and the other is a framework for accountability to measure and ensure implementation across fifteen common indicators to develop a UNCT (United Nations Country Team) scorecard [22, 28]. Scoring takes place across four major thematic areas that encompass the fifteen aforementioned indicators:

- i) **Leadership, strategic planning and management:** leadership, strategic planning, disability-specific policy, institutional set-up
- ii) **Inclusiveness:** consultation with persons with disabilities, accessibility and conferences, accommodation, procurement

- iii) **Programming:** programmes and projects, evaluation, country programme documents, joint initiatives
- iv) **Organizational culture:** employment, capacity development, communication

In 2016-17, the scorecard for inclusion of disability was revised and brought in alignment with the UN SDGs and an assessment was carried out in Kyrgyzstan [23]. It began with a comprehensive reporting of all fifteen indicators to establish baseline ratings. The rest of the steps were as follows:

- i) **Background preparation** – technical guidance, appointment of assessment team and selection of a consultant for external support.
- ii) **Assessment** – gathering data/evidence and assigning scores to each indicator
- iii) **Action plan** – submission of scores for broader discussion at workshops, followed by the submission of findings and draft action plan to UNCT for feedback
- iv) **Reporting and feedback** – drafting and submission of UNCT scorecard and final action plan by consultant to UN headquarters.

Ultimately, the activities and scores are rated against minimum requirements in the following categories – ‘exceeds’, ‘meets’, ‘approaches’, ‘missing’.

### **UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women**

The Fund came into being in 1996, in the Beijing World Conference on Women - formally marking the recognition of the need to stop active violence against women and girls as an important priority – and has been administered by UN Women on behalf of the UN system [24]. It works with civil society organizations and women’s rights organizations to empower groups that are at risk of violence, engage strategically with boys and men to prevent violence, increase capacity of service providers to improve response effectiveness, strengthen implementation of policies and mandates [25]. The Fund is put to use in the following manner:

- a) Award of grants: [26]
  - i) UN Trust Fund awards grants to women’s rights groups and movements that implement projects at all levels to end violence against women & girls. Capacity building is usually an integral part of the framework.
  - ii) The Fund seeks gender experts with thematic specialization in fostering women’s rights and feminist movements in poor and backward countries
  - iii) They are made to be members of the Technical Review Group (TRG), which facilitates with the Fund’s reviewing mechanism of all applications.
- b) Selection of proposals: [27]
  - i) Outcome Mapping - a method of planning, monitoring and evaluation that focuses on changes in the behaviour of people, groups and organizations with whom a programme works directly – is resorted to.

ii) UN Trust Fund seeks to ensure that emerging trends are captured and made available to its stakeholders and a wide range of practitioners.

c) Knowledge generation and its dissemination

Aside from these initiatives, there are some intersectionality-oriented organizations that operate from India as well. Two of the prominent ones are: “All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch”, and “Gender at Work”. The former functions under the National Campaign on Dalit Humanrights - Rights (NCDHR) and confronts grave evils, such as caste discrimination, class-based exploitation, and general problems such as social hierarchies and patriarchy as a platform for Dalit women [30]. Qualities of solidarity and inclusivity are integral to its operational framework. Some of the oppressions that have been highlighted by AIDMAM are believed to draw support from robust caste-based and class-based hierarchies, and the strategies to combat them include the advocacy of strategic economic rights which aim specifically at marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities, alongside the integration of multi-layered approaches that intersect caste, class, and gender. The organization addresses intersectionality by laying emphasis on differentiated experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women within these communities, in a bid to ensure the inclusion of their concerns and perspectives in budgetary planning (an important aspect) and the realization of rights. It undoubtedly begins with the recognition of socio-economic marginalization of these populations, while ensuring their inclusion, participation, and accountability, thereby cementing their leadership and participation in feminist and economic justice movements [30]. On the other hand, “Gender at Work” aims for social transformation through emphasis on the practices that help learners understand various intersectional dimensions within the feminist movements. This they do by making use of workshops, training courses, and storytelling sessions. Other roles include their facilitation with networks for collective action toward gender justice, policy advocacy, enhancing organizational design to promote inclusion of intersectional identities, capacity building, collaborative learning, etc. [31]

## CONCLUSION

The fundamental interpretations of intersectionality in feminism are like two sides of the same coin. One argues in favor of celebrating the existence of unity in diversities, through proliferation and mainstreaming of narratives that convey the message of embracing ‘people as they are’ over what ‘they should be’, while acknowledging the importance of their roles in their own capacities through the inclusion of representations from diverse categories. The other has, in the past, viewed this as a challenge to a mindset that has thrived on the likes of elitism and racial superiority, thus attempting to isolate the very belief that was destined to strengthen a movement from its core. The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to host both perspectives with an added burden of having to witness a rising number of conflicts between individuals of different sexes. We now live in a world where accusations of misogyny and misandry are a common sight and are growing nastier in the qualitative sense, as time passes by.

Every problem has a solution that awaits the light of the day. But the most important of skills lies in the ability to accurately define a problem, for that alone strengthens the possibility of unearthing the real potential of a prospective solution. Ideally, the problem of rising feminist tendencies precedes that of suppressed intersectionality in feminist activism. This is true, because it ponders one to think where men and male-dominated institutions might have historically gone wrong, while acknowledging that the latter is actually a problem within a larger one of its kind. But staying on course with the spirit of this text, it can be concluded that the tendency to suppress intersectional representations within the group of feminists across the world only stands to further complicate the cause that their movement reflects, and the gains made by them. Diversity is a qualitative indicator of the range of perspectives that exist, which further indicates the challenges faced by certain groups of individuals. That in turn, quantitatively communicates the number of people that silently await justice. A harsh reality in light of the aforesaid chain of thought that needs immediate realization is that of a scenario where every demand may not see through to its fruition. And since it is wise to understand that prolonged/unaddressed problems lead to scenarios where aggravated drawbacks manifest faster, one may witness a world with significantly more feminists continue in their wait for having their demands fulfilled - all in the wake of not building consensus on embracing intersectionality in the present i.e., now. Among numerous literatures available in the digital realm, this is a call for understanding the seriousness of the same.

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