How Social Movements Build Power through Intersectionality

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In recent years, the term "intersectionality" has gained prominence in popular culture, news coverage, and in political organizing and activism. This newfound popularity is the legacy of feminists of color who, in the 1970s and 80s, aimed to empower silenced groups in advocacy organizations, academia, and social institutions. Due to the term's wide use and the complexity of the idea at its root, many are confused about its definition.

Broadly defined, **intersectionality is the idea that disadvantage is conditioned by multiple interacting systems of oppression**. When racism and sexism interact —in the experience of women of color, for instance— the disadvantages produced are different than the disadvantages produced by racism and sexism on their own. These distinct lived experiences have important policy implications that tend to be left unattended.

Social movements and civic groups can benefit if they understand and implement this understanding of overlapping systems of disadvantage into their organizing and advocacy work. These approaches build on the leadership and insight of groups that experience multiple forms of oppression, ensure their inclusion, and make movements more responsive to their various constituent groups, thereby increasing the group's legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers. To take a truly intersectional approach, however, organizations and movements must both recognize and represent groups that are affected by interconnected disadvantage in their leadership while prioritizing these groups' concerns in their agendas.

History of Intersectionality

Critical race theorist and constitutional law scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term in 1989, but the ideas behind it predate Crenshaw's work. Early formulations of intersectionality can be found in Maria Stewart's writings in the 1830s, Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, and enacted by Savitribai Phule's advocacy in India. Early champions of this concept were careful to:

- **Reveal and address areas where policy is silent.** They sought to confront the challenges experienced by disadvantaged groups — particularly those who experience multiple, interacting forms of disadvantage.
- **Break with simplistic views of social groups.** They rejected the idea that there are universal experiences associated with each identity, such as universal womanhood or Blackness.
- **Avoid additive explanations of oppression.** They argued that Black women's oppression does not equal the lived experiences of Black men plus the problems of white women.

The concept's intellectual and political importance grew significantly in the 1970s and 80s thanks to the work of Black, Mestiza, post-colonial, queer, and Indigenous feminists, including Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks, who pushed social movements and academia to recognize previously ignored perspectives and identities. Proponents, such as the Combahee River Collective, pointed to the obstacles that women of color faced in ascending to leadership roles within activist-oriented organizations — particularly within civil rights and women's movements. And while these advocates decried the lack of inclusion of Black women in particular in the leadership of women's and civil rights movements, they did not call for separating from these movements. Overcoming oppression in the many forms that Black women experienced it, they argued, was only to be achieved through coalition-building efforts.

Organizing That Creates Coalitions across Different Groups

Truly successful political organizing entails reassessing a movement's structure, political priorities, and practices to address overlapping forms of disadvantage and oppression. Adopting an intersectional approach

to organizing consists of ongoing negotiations to create ties and coalitions across different social groups. Below are recommendations for organizations and movements that hope to better serve their constituents with these principles:

Foster awareness. Most people understand that social structures, policy, and others' lives are complex. Organizations should build on this awareness to help members understand how overlapping and intertwined systems of disadvantage and oppression affect various individuals and groups differently. Feminists of color have cautioned against debating which subgroup is more oppressed, as these discussions can be divisive and inconclusive; rather, advocacy groups should identify the experiences that shape their constituents' lives and build their political advocacy agendas accordingly.

Embrace diversity as a political resource. Rather than merely celebrating diversity, a truly effective approach creates systems that address power differences between groups. Advocates should consider building inclusive decision-making processes, and including overlappingly-disadvantaged groups in leadership while prioritizing their concerns. These systems of inclusion help organizations address internal divisions and sustain cooperation across different groups. When organizations comport themselves in this way, they are seen as more legitimate advocates of disadvantaged communities.

Look to other movements and civic groups for examples. Many organizations are already using this approach to great advantage. Innovative intersectional approaches take stock of their internal differences, identify conflicts, and address them proactively. Conversely, suppressing dissent and differences has led to further exclusion and fragmentation.

What Next?

Although mobilizing diverse groups presents challenges for civic organizations and social movements, identifying internal differences and taking proactive steps to address them helps sustain cooperation — and ultimately, that cooperation is a necessary ingredient in successful advocacy for policies that improve the lives of disadvantaged and oppressed groups. Intersectionality is a useful organizing model for movements and advocacy groups that can enhance their political influence and ability to persist over time.

Read more in Fernando Tormos, "Intersectional Solidarity." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, no. 4 (2017).