INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality: conceptualisation, implementation and challenges

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Origins and outreach intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality arises in the context of American black feminism (from authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) (1989)[1]— with the aim of grasping the situation of structural discrimination and inequality suffered by black women from a feminist and anti-racist perspective. The key point was to show that these two axes (gender and race) [2] separately could not explain their situation of inequality, but rather it was necessary to see how they interlinked and shaped a particular oppressive experience.

Today, the term has expanded and it is used to show how different axes of inequality (such as gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, functional diversity or age, among others) are related to each other and form concrete forms of discrimination and inequality. Both in the field of academia, as well as in social movements and institutions, it is a fundamental concept for dealing with issues linked to inequalities, discrimination and violence.

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In the case of sexist violence, the recent adoption of Law 17/2020 as an amendment to Law 5/2008, on the right of women to eradicate sexist violence, specifically incorporates this concept, which is defined as “the occurrence of sexist violence with other axes of discrimination, such as origin, skin colour, phenotype, ethnicity, religion, administrative situation, age, social class, economic precariousness, functional or mental diversity, addictions, serological status, deprivation of freedom or sexual and gender diversity” and the law argues that this “makes them have an impact in an aggravated and differentiated way”. It also states that “the interaction of these discriminations must be taken into account when dealing with sexist violence”.

Intersectionality and application to gender-based violence

How can we take into account intersectionality in an already complex issue such as sexist violence? Below I will present some of the basic premises on intersectionality to see how this framework of analysis could be considered.

First, intersectionality states that oppression experiences cannot be understood from a single explanatory framework. That is to say, to understand a case such as the exploitation of labour and sexual abuse of Huelva strawberry collectors, one must take into account both class and patriarchy, colonialism, racism or issues linked to religion and language [3]. Without considering these different issues and the specific way in which they interact and materialise in this particular case, one cannot understand what caused this situation, nor can one find ways to deal with it.

In addition, intersectionality also shows that specific forms of violence are not the sum of several axes but are shaped in a specific form [4]; that is to say, that a woman will not suffer more violence due to being a migrant and a lesbian than one who is indigenous and heterosexual. From an intersectional perspective, one has to understand that the forms of violence that each will suffer will be different, as they will be shaped by their positions in relation to gender, but also their origin and sexual orientation, among other things.

This idea also leads to the understanding that all people are positioned on all axes of inequality and that there is therefore no neutral position. Men have gender, white people have ethnicity, and all the axes make up our experience even if sometimes they do so in a more pronounced way than others. Therefore, when public policies are enacted aimed at women, it must be considered that women are not a homogeneous collective and that each specific policy will affect them according to their social positions. Although the different axes are not taken into account, these axes always operate in social relations and they condition the access of certain groups to certain resources or favour others.

It is therefore very important to understand that intersectionality is about both oppression and privilege [5]. It is not that intersectionality searches for groups oppressed by various axes and identifies them as more vulnerable groups, but that, from an intersectional perspective, positions of oppression and privilege condition the way they suffer violence, discrimination and inequalities.

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In addition to this complexity, the factor of context must be added, as depending on the place and time the configuration of discriminations will vary [6]. The way a young woman who is white and heterosexual can suffer sexist violence will vary if she is at her home, at school, in the street, at her friend's house, in a bar, with the feminist group in her town or traveling to Mongolia. And we also need to take into account these spatial dynamics of intersectionality so as not to fall into victimising speeches or rigid and unmoving ideas about social positions. So far, the basic premises for conducting intersectional analysis.

The diversity of axes of inequality

When we talk about those inequalities, what are these axes that we talk about? In the articulation of the law, reference is made to a number of axes ranging from issues linked to culture, origin, nationality or racialisation, to issues linked to social class, related to health or physical or mental condition, or sexual and gender diversity. Other issues such as physical appearance, the urban/rural axis, ideology, motherhood, national identity or any other aspect that generates inequalities in a structural way and is the cause of violence and discrimination could be added to these axes.

From an intersectional perspective, it is concluded that the identification of separate axes is an abstraction from a reality in which axes are shaped: only as an exercise of abstraction can different axes be identified, since in reality they are all given simultaneously and interlinked. For example, the way sexism affects a three-year-old girl is different from how it affects her mother or grandmother. So, even if we can identify that giving only a certain kind of toy to a girl is an example of sexism, sexism is also shaped by age.

On the diversity of axes, it is also important to bear in mind that from an intersectional perspective the incorporation of new axes does not minimise or play down the other axes. In this sense, incorporating the anti-racist perspective, for example, does not make the gender axis less important, but helps us to understand it better, because it allows us to understand the relations between colonialism and patriarchy. The same applies to the trans question: recognising transphobia as a form of gender-based violence does not make the violence suffered by cis women any less important or less serious, but helps us to

understand better how the gender binomial is constructed. Understanding this is essential. Firstly, because racism and transphobia systematically provoke violence and feminism should also consider these issues, and, secondly, because warning of the importance of an axis does not jeopardise the fight against sexist violence, but allows us to better measure its own dynamics.

Overcoming competition between axes

New axes can appear at anytime, and the fact that they appear probably means that there has been political work behind them to identify previously invisible inequalities. Raising awareness and creating a political discourse with the aim to transform an unfair situation involves a collective effort. Thus, the incorporation of axes should be celebrated as a significant step in the visibilisation of specific forms of discrimination. It should not be seen as an exhaustive task because we have to add complexity, or from the point of view of a meticulous scrutiny as to whether the new axis is valid (or not) to enter the list.

This also means overcoming the logic of cross-axis competition and no longer opposing them as if the anti-racist or anti-transphobia struggle were contrary to the feminist struggle. Black Feminists such as bell hooks (1984) [7] claimed that fighting a form of discrimination or violence benefits the fight against other forms of discrimination and violence, and that undermine a form of discrimination or violence reinforces the basis on which they are all based. In other words, the anti-racist fight benefits the fight against the patriarchy because it breaks the foundations on which all forms of domination are underpinned, which is basically the idea that the lives of some people are worth more than those of other people, and that they can therefore be excluded, exploited and violated. And at the same time, what she says is that to undermine the anti-racist struggle or to reinforce racism is to make this common basis of domination more solid, thus making the basis on which the patriarchy rests more solid and therefore also strengthening sexist violence.

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Therefore, from an intersectional perspective, the struggle of young people, students, workers, migrants, lesbians, prisoners, refugees or Romani should be seen as struggles that also help to dismantle the basis of patriarchy. Because the basis is the same, but also because women are students, workers, migrants, prisoners, refugees or Romani.

Addressing complexity

All this complexity that calls for the application of the intersectional perspective often gives rise to some anguish. An anguish related to the fact that the concept is seen as new and sudden and related to the need to take into account a perspective that is perceived as highly theoretical and for which there are few references or models to follow. Of course, intersectionality means considering the complexity of social relations and, in particular, of sexist violence. It means understanding that it materialises in specific ways for people who are in different positions in relation to capitalist, racist, ageist, ablest, LGBT-phobic and so on. For example, it is important to see how the public administration exercises institutional racism and violence against women in many instances.

But the need for reflection and action against these dynamics should not make invisible the practices that have already occurred in various spaces historically. Intersectionality is a concept that comes from black feminism in the United States, but intersectional action and thought as a genuine phenomenon of development of practices and theories of inter-axis interaction has existed in our context since the 1970s. Linking issues of gender and class, or gender and sexual orientation, national identity or age has been developed as a political practice, especially by social movements, from which one can build. In this sense, the application of the intersectional perspective is neither so new nor so foreign. We need to recover our own local genealogies, from Maria Mercè Marçal to the feminist activism that already in the days of 1976 linked gender issues to many other axes of inequality.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasise that, in the current context of the concept's whitewashing and the risk of instrumentalisation, one has to go to the roots of the term and understand that intersectionality is not a synonym of diversity or a way of considering people's different identities. Intersectionality is a proposal to understand how structural inequalities specifically affect different social groups, and that change necessarily occurs to transform these structural inequalities. It is a challenge that must be met by establishing alliances and rethinking current practices, from a feminist perspective that is also open to other forms of inequality.

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

1 — Crenshaw, Kimberlee (1989). «Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, And Antiracist Politics». *The University Of Chicago Legal Forum*, No. 140, pp. 139-167.
2 — I use the concept of *race* because it is used by authors who developed the concept of interaction.
3 — Filigrana, Pastora. «Vuelven las jornaleras marroquíes de la fresa». *Contexto y Acción* [available online].
4 — Collins, Patricia Hill (2000). *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment*, 2nd edition. Londres: Routledge.

5 — Yuval-Davis, Nira (2011). *The politics of belonging. Intersectional contestations*. Londres: SAGE Publications.
6 — Rodó-Zárate, Maria (2021). *Interseccionalitat. Desigualtats, llocs i emocions*. Barcelona: Tigre de Paper.
7 — hooks, bell (1984). *Feminist Theory. From Margin To Center*. New York and Massachusetts: South End Press.



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