SHIFTING POWER: MULTI-LAYERED INCLUSION AND INTERSECTIONALITY

CURATED DISCUSSION #1
INTRODUCTION

The Generation Equality Forum is a global gathering for gender equality, convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France in close partnership with civil society. Kicking off in Mexico City, Mexico from the 29th to 31st of March, and culminating in June in Paris, France, the Forum will launch a set of concrete, ambitious and transformative actions to achieve immediate and irreversible progress towards gender equality.

Over two sessions in September 2020, the Generation Equality Forum (CEF) convened the first in a series of five Curated Discussions. The purpose of these Discussions is to bring together a group of select and diverse gender advocates to cultivate insights and contributions around important and relevant topics. These insights will feed into the outcomes of the Forum and aim to strengthen multi-stakeholder discussions and alliance building.

The first Curated Discussion to kick-off this series addressed the topic of ‘multi-layered inclusion and intersectionality’. The two sessions hosted approximately 100 attendees from diverse age groups, locations and backgrounds, cultivating a rich discussion. The content of this report is drawn from discussions in plenary and breakout groups across both sessions, highlighting key themes, thoughts and tangible recommendations to inform the substance of the CEF.

WHAT IS 'INTERSECTIONALITY'?  

Kimberlé Crenshaw [2] originally coined the term ‘intersectionality’ in 1989 to conceptualize the junction at which race and gender interacted to oppress Black women. She argued that, because of their intersectional identity as both women and people of colour within discourses that are shaped to respond to either one or the other, the interests of women of colour are frequently marginalized within both. Her work highlighted that women’s experiences are multidimensional. They are not only shaped by gender, but also by a plethora of other identities such as race, class and sexuality.

The notion of intersectionality, therefore, is that these identities are not separate categories, but instead intersect to impact each individual in a different way. The intersections come together to shape the different powers and privileges that one is afforded and the forms of discrimination one is subjected to.

WHY IS INTERSECTIONALITY IMPORTANT FOR THE GEF?

We are living in an increasingly complex world with multiple forms of discrimination and intersecting inequalities. This reality has been exemplified clearly in the differentiated impact of the COVID-19 crisis, where the needs of marginalised groups remain overlooked and unaddressed. It is therefore vital to further develop our strategies to centre the principles of intersectionality and inclusion in the CEF. By unpacking the issues and what they mean for different constituencies, and developing concrete recommendations, we can ensure that concepts such as intersectionality do not remain abstract but are instead concretely reflected and addressed as we build multi-stakeholder alliances and determine the design and substance of the CEF.

[1] The Curated Discussion was held over two complementary sessions (22nd and 24th September 2020) in order to facilitate the widest engagement and variety of voices possible, accounting for time zones, interpretation requirements and so forth.

[2] Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw is an American lawyer, civil rights advocate, philosopher, and a leading scholar of critical race theory who developed the theory of intersectionality.
Language is a powerful, transformative tool and we must work to ensure that terms such as ‘intersectionality’ are not reduced to buzz words or their multiplicity of meanings across different contexts ignored. The concept of intersectionality helps to drive the inclusion of all women and groups across thematic areas and policies.

For women with disabilities, a lack of understanding and lack of explicit language serves to erase this group in policy making and programming. They are often neglected and forgotten in education and employment and have strong links to poverty. The intersectional lens is important in helping us to not prioritize one of these discriminations over another, but instead to look at how the multiple layers shape different identities and access.

We can learn a lot about diversity through reconceptualization, for example we could state that nobody is disabled and instead we are all differently abled. Women with disabilities should be acknowledged as women first and foremost, allowing us to move away from the stigma and stereotyping of the victim/medical model. Practically, we take away the rights, chances and opportunities from these women when we fail to create an environment that is accessible to this group. Societies need to be transformed in a way that these barriers are eliminated, and that diversity is recognised as a strength.

[3] The medical model defines disability as resulting from an individual person’s physical or mental limitation, placing the source of the problem within the person. Under this definition, disability is related to biology and not the social or geographical environments and is regarded as a defect or sickness. The medical model often refers to a disabled person as a victim, which can be patronizing and offensive.
PART 1: UNPACK THE PROBLEM

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE OR CATEGORIZE INTERSECTIONAL INEQUALITY?

The intersecting of different social identities produces a compounded type of inequality based on multiple factors such as gender and class, and what emerges is a complex web of oppressions. Multiple dimensions of intersectional inequality can be discerned, scaling from the individual to the institutional to the systemic and historical denominations. These dimensions highlight the multiple inequalities experienced by individual women around the world and also the longevity of the structures that shape and reinforce these inequalities.

Intersectional inequality is a systemic problem, shaped where the wholeness of the self meets cultural and institutional limits to produce discrimination, violence and stigma. It is therefore vital to contextualize these intersecting oppressions. Intersectionality, then, is a fluid concept which changes the way in which inequalities are exacerbated in different settings against the backdrop of local, national and international contexts.

In a context shaped by power imbalances along gender and race lines, having only one voice defining intersectionality can risk overlooking its nuances. We must not forget that defining intersectional inequality is an act of power in itself. Therefore, any definition of intersectional inequalities must be shaped from the grassroots level up and take a holistic approach in order to understand the systems and structures at play in each context.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES AND DRIVERS OF INTERSECTIONAL INEQUALITY?

HISTORICAL & STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Throughout history, structures and policies have been put in place by dominant groups and many of these remain today. Patriarchy and colonialism are obvious examples of this. Different forms of structural injustice and violence lead to heightened discrimination and marginalization of specific groups including, inter alia, indigenous women living in rural areas, whose collective and individual rights are threatened, such as their right to land.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

It is essential to create an accountability structure, as without one there is no impetus to defend the space of those who are discriminated against. Policy making needs to ensure that human rights are upheld and that people are able to live in freedom, with justice and peace. There must be meaningful accountability when this is not upheld.
Intersectional discrimination takes us away from the possibility of assessing the richness of intersectional identities and forces them into isolation and exclusion.

Power dynamics

Who holds the power and who holds the resources? These dynamics shape a hierarchy which defines and determines worth and agency, and this is often self-perpetuating or sustained through channels such as the media. Experiences of discrimination can further contribute to a lack of access to power, therefore limiting who can enact change.

Social factors/norms

Lack of understanding, such as that surrounding different gender identities, disabilities, religious intolerance, all feed into discriminatory laws and cultural norms. We must listen to multiple voices in order to recognize there is no singular way of experiencing an issue, and we must ensure that such multiplicity is reflected in policymaking.

Punitive laws

Punitive laws fail to be inclusive and protect communities and instead perpetuate discrimination against certain groups. For example, laws that indirectly or directly criminalize sexual orientation, gender identity or expression result in higher poverty rates, inability to access basic rights and development services such as sensitized healthcare, education and employment. These laws are grounded in the patriarchy and cisgender heteronormativity which are also root causes of gender inequality. Other examples are laws surrounding abortion access, wearing head scarfs for Muslim women.

Drivers within feminist movement

A cultural hierarchy persists in the feminist movement which shapes participation. The privileging of some identities and discrimination against others influences who has their experiences made visible. Single identity advocacy divides groups into silos and breaks down solidarity, forcing the prioritization of one identity over another and driving exclusion.

Politics

Voices can be amplified or silenced through a variety of tools. For example, the national census has become a political tool reflecting how data is often manipulated by patriarchal systems. The census determines the allocations of budgets and which services people receive and is an act of power that can exacerbate inequalities since some populations, such as migrant women, don’t hold the resources to fill out the census, resulting in their invisibility.

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PART 2: CREATE THE SOLUTION

HOW MIGHT INTERNATIONAL ACTORS FOSTER INTERSECTIONAL AND MULTI-LAYERED INCLUSION?

A) HOW SHOULD MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS (MNCs) FOSTER INTERSECTIONAL AND MULTI-LAYERED INCLUSION?

- **Advocacy**: Call on MNCs to use their power to influence progress towards diversity and inclusion, for example by leveraging good monitoring practices and demonstrating the loss of revenue for MNCs resulting from the exclusions of key populations.

- **Collaboration**: Ensure close collaboration between the ‘international’ and the ‘national/local’ community to try and flatten the power hierarchy between the two by working closely with key stakeholders such as government and civil society.

- **Policy**: MNCs should uphold good practices in organizational policies. It would be important to increase availability of studies and research that highlight the aspects of diversity quotas and its positive impact on business.

- **Monitoring**: Increase monitoring of human rights implementation by UN and international actors, including through existing intergovernmental and human rights structures such as CEDAW.

B) HOW CAN THE GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM BE FURTHER STRENGTHENED TO ADDRESS INTERSECTIONAL DISCRIMINATION?

- **Centralize feminist voices**: Amplify the voices of women who challenge the status quo and reshape what is the “norm” and scrutinize the impact of varying international definitions of “norm”.

- **Accountability**: Enhance accountability and oversight for the domestication and national implementation of international legal instruments and standards.

- **Education**: Leverage education to increase public understanding of the human rights system. Share information and guidelines for participation in the development and promotion of human rights, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

- **COVID 19**: COVID-19 has laid bare and exacerbated existing gender inequalities while illustrating the positive impact of women’s political leadership in institutions. The pandemic offers an opportunity to strengthen the ways in which international actors work together and work alongside regional entities and grassroots organizations. There will be no success at beating COVID without global co-operation, such as in the form of economic relief and around vaccine distribution.

- **Collaboration**: Collaboration must occur at all levels from local to global. Policy making needs to be bi-directional, with the national shaping the international and vice versa.
**How Can We Foster Collaboration Among Diverse Actors and Strengthen Social Movements to Bring About Positive Change?**

- **Policy:** Corporations should advance inclusiveness through comprehensive anti-discrimination policies.
- **Accountability:** Strengthen partnerships with national human rights institutions, CSOs, mainstream society, and youth groups in order to educate them about equality, human rights and non-discrimination so that we increase understanding and support for the enactment of anti-discrimination legislations.
- **Inclusion:** Bring together all voices and be truly, intentionally inclusive by sharing power.
- **Solidarity:** Build solidarity among heterogeneous groups of people and identify a shared collective vision. Foster awareness and embrace diversity.
- **Youth Engagement:** Include youth in decision making and ensure that youth leadership is fostered. Youth must be empowered to shape their future by fostering intergenerational dialogue, design and strategy building.
- **Media and Information:** Reach people using different media. We need to mainstream the discussion on intersectionality and explore the varying issues of different groups and identities.

**How Might We Create Greater Inclusion, Including the Voices and Leadership of Youth, in Political and Economic Decision Making?**

- **Observation and learning:** Monitor the participation of young people and observe their ways of working and adapt to these new techniques. Assess if spaces and jobs are accessible for young people to participate and be sure that the space adapts to young activists and not the other way around.
- **Training:** Give support to training young people in all their diversities. Have mentoring and induction processes to enable access for youth.
- **Active inclusion:** Lower the barriers to inclusion, for example allowing young people to participate without requirements such as many years of experience or needing to register their organization with the United Nations. Young people need to be put at the heart of policies and discussions and we must adapt to include them to level out power dynamics. We must meet all interpretation needs.

**How Might New and Existing Institutions (National and Local Level) Ensure That Anti-Discrimination Laws and Policies Are Effectively Implemented?**

- **Audit:** Look at the efficacy of current institutions and assess their impact. Conduct a mapping and scanning of laws at national level that are punitive for intersectional inclusivity and advocate for their amendment.
- **Cultural change:** We need the topic of discrimination to become a priority in national plans to help nudge cultural change to take place at local, national and international level.
- **Representation:** Include missing voices and perspectives at the decision-making table. Intentionally apply intersectionality and promote women in political leadership positions in institutions. Among possible solutions, progressive quotas could be considered.
- **Data, information, technology:** Ethical data collection and “inclusive data collection strategies” could support more inclusive budgeting processes and address lack of budgeting in key areas. Without such data, certain categories of people are left behind systematically or made invisible. It is important to invest in strengthening the skills of communities to produce their own data.
- **Media and narratives:** Develop and uphold ethical guidelines for media to be more representative and give agency to those being depicted. Large advertising corporations have a key role to play in transformation.

**How Might Better Disaggregated Data and More Qualitative Research Help Us Understand Intersectional Inequalities and Shift Power?**

- **Type of data:** Promote non-binary and disaggregated data to tackle intersectionality. Then advocate for policies, programmes and laws based on the evidence from this data. Increase the capacities of relevant practitioners and the Ministries of Statistics.
- **Data Collection:** Develop different ways to collect data to be more inclusive and tell different stories, which could in turn generate shifts in what is perceived as the ‘norm’. Ensure that such research exercises are adequately funded and that there is accountability for data collection and evaluation.
- **Political will:** Promote political will through advocacy to complement data generation on gender equality.
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW SHOULD THE ISSUES TACKLED IN THIS DISCUSSION BE REFLECTED IN THE GEF AND ACTION COALITIONS?

1. THE GEF MUST INTENTIONALLY CENTRALIZE MARGINALIZED VOICES

The GEF needs to make a conscious effort to bring marginalized communities to the forefront to discuss their priorities and needs. The GEF must take the lead in recognizing power and intentionally choosing to share it, for example by hearing the voices of the young indigenous girl alongside the voice of a Head of State, by addressing people offline, and by working intergenerationally.

2. YOUTH MUST BE MEANINGFULLY ENGAGED AT EVERY STEP IN THE GEF PROCESSES

This especially applies to youth from marginalized communities who may not have access to internet connection. The GEF should hold regional pre-conversations with youth and adolescent girls for input and co-creation to foster ownership and build momentum. Work should also be done to map what the youth activist space looks like, as youth movements tend to be more complex and require different methods for inclusion. Youth engagement could be boosted by building connections with universities, which would facilitate the engagement of adolescent girls. The Forum should also consider providing intergenerational learning opportunities to educate young activists on international mechanisms to help ensure their safety and security (i.e. around freedom of speech and expression).

3. THE GEF MUST BE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

The GEF must seek to bridge the technical divide to reach those who may not have access to technology or internet by using radio, printed materials, video trainings and lectures. We must intentionally target these less accessible groups and reach an audience outside the usual activists in protected spaces, especially in the case of youth. Art could be a good medium to break barriers for engagement. The GEF should develop protocols to allow particular groups (such as people with disabilities) to participate in physical and psychological safety. Further consideration is needed on how to continue to break down language barriers (i.e. for indigenous peoples).
4. EVERY ACTION COALITION (AC) SHOULD BE INCLUSIVE AND HAVE CONCRETE RECOMMENDATIONS ADDRESSING THE INTERSECTING DISCRIMINATIONS IN SOCIETY

The conversation around basic needs is essential to have across all the Action Coalitions; these are fundamental and must not be overlooked. Decision making mechanisms in the ACs must be restructured to be representative of all women and there needs to be more inclusion of the private sector and grassroots organizations to ensure meaningful progress. A specific recommendation is for the AC on technology to conduct research about technologically driven job displacement focusing on marginalized groups. The calls for naming members of the Action Coalitions must be more inclusive and engage civil society to help target the most marginalized and least represented populations.

5. INTERSECTIONAL THINKING MUST BE INTEGRATED INTO THE ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURES OF THE ACTION COALITIONS

The Action Coalitions impact measuring and accountability structures must have clear and defined success indicators, and these indicators should be disaggregated to reflect intersectionality. Youth groups should be supported and engaged in monitoring and tracking the Action Coalition implementation for the next 5 years.

6. THE GEF MUST BE A STANDARD SETTER

The GEF should mirror its principles in its structures. How we work is as important as what we are working on, and therefore we must not further silo issues and solutions and must set a standard of working with a lens of 'intentional intersectionality'. We need to foster an overall environment that is safe and provide spaces that are inclusive and non-violent. Compensation and resources should always be provided where available.

7. THE OPPORTUNITY SHOULD BE TAKEN TO COUNTER DOMINANT MEDIA NARRATIVES THROUGH GEF COMMUNICATIONS CHANNELS

We need to create a shared narrative around the GEF that makes it of more interest to the general public and policy makers, highlighting the importance of breaking down stereotypes, challenging gender roles and promoting equality and inclusion of all people. The GEF could create content that unpacks concepts like intersectionality that are not commonly used by the media and have different meanings depending on the context, thus promoting diversity. The Forum’s communication platforms could also act as avenues for amplification, championing examples of advancing institutional innovation for gender equality.
8. THE GEF SHOULD FOSTER CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND COOPERATION

This can be done by providing a space for different stakeholders to engage with one another on a level playing field, for example linking policy makers and governments with social movements. Particular emphasis should be placed on identifying synergies between various actors and youth specifically. The GEF should work to build solidarity among heterogeneous groups of people, fostering awareness across sectors and embracing diversity in order to identify a shared collective vision for progress. The private sector must be brought into the conversation, and strategic partnerships between the private sector, civil society, and governments must be forged to ensure that there is a cohesive approach.

9. A KEY PURPOSE OF THE GEF SHOULD BE TO BRING THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

Scaling up from the local to the global is essential and will be supported by the collaborative partnerships outlined in recommendation 8. Civil society raises many issues, but they are often not prioritized by those holding power. The GEF should amplify local needs and demands by bringing these stakeholders together in one room. In such convening moments, the GEF should provide spaces, financial resources, thought leadership and facilitation in order to lift conversations that are happening at the local level up to the global level. Lifting from the bottom-up will provide legitimacy rooted in community and grassroots actions. The GEF should also play a role in strengthening and enhancing regional platforms and cross-regional exchanges.

THANK YOU

WE WOULD LIKE TO OFFER OUR DEEPEST THANKS TO ALL THOSE WHO COMMITTED THEIR TIME TO MAKE THIS FIRST CURATED DISCUSSION AS RICH AND EMPOWERING AS POSSIBLE, AND LOOK FORWARD TO CONTINUING THE GEF JOURNEY TOGETHER, IN SOLIDARITY.
THANK YOU FOR HAVING CONTRIBUTED TO MAKING THE FIRST GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM CURATED DISCUSSION LIVELY, ENGAGING AND CONSTRUCTIVE.

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