

Dear Circle Member

At the last circle event I was asked to speak about what intersectionality means and why we, as the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls, must take an intersectional perspective on policy making in Scotland.



Since then, I have been contacted many times to share my presentation – however rather than share a few slides of diagrams that require interpretation, it is of more benefit for me to make my points clear. The reason this clarity is needed, is because whilst the term “intersectionality” has of late, become part of the policy making lexicon in Scotland, it is too often, misused or misunderstood.

I am by no means an expert on this issue, any expertise and determination I have for intersectional policy making come from lived experience as a Muslim woman of colour but most importantly from the academic writing of Kimberle Crenshaw, the architect of the term “intersectionality”. I had the joy and privilege of hearing Professor Crenshaw speak in Edinburgh and this line of her speech sums up why intersectional thinking matters:

“What is the story? Who gets to tell it? What gets left out? All of this shapes how we seek justice for generations to come”

Intersectionality was first defined in a 1989 academic paper by Crenshaw to express the double discrimination faced by black women in America. They face the simultaneous discrimination of sexism and racism (and therefore gendered racism, or racist sexism). Viewing individuals' lives as overlapping across inequalities related to race, sex, gender identity, sexuality, class, caring responsibilities, or religion allows us to better understand that we do not exist in silos, that we experience multiple discriminations within a society where multiple inequalities continue. The experiences of racism, sexism and poverty for example, do not exist in isolation from one another, they are consequences of multiple systems that interrelate, as such, it is not surprising that women of colour are more likely to be living in poverty.

If we do not see and respect these intersections, then we ignore the lived experiences of so many women in Scotland. Intersectionality invites us to take a more nuanced, inclusive and realistic approach to feminism, to anti-racism, to class inequality and more. Intersectional thinking understands that structures of oppression are not separate from one another, but rather are all interlinked and compound one another. It is a means by which to make visible the women living in between.

In her 1989 paper she states:

“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is

harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.”

Collins and Bilge, 2016, explained that:

“Major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example race, class, gender, dis/ability and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities but build on each other and work together”

Without an intersectional understanding, we risk seeing women as a homogenous group. We risk policies that work for women who already have some access to power, opportunity or wealth (and these risks have been realised over decades of policy making; where we continue to see women of colour or working class women over-represented in undervalued and low paid jobs, for example). We assume that the experiences of all women are the same and therefore policy interventions will benefit them all equally, however this is rarely the case.

“A trickle down approach to social justice, simply doesn’t work” – Kimberle Crenshaw 2016

Intersectionality, is not a replacement for the word “diversity” and should not be used as such. Having a diverse range of people from all backgrounds in a room and diverse minds making decisions is incredibly important; intersectionality is more about assessing how the decisions in the room are made, what these decisions are, whether critical analysis of systems and multiple discriminations is taking place, as well as consideration on how women who are at the precipice of these discriminations are likely to be impacted by the decision. Intersectional thinking and analysis can also contribute to people from diverse backgrounds getting into the room to make the decisions in the first place.

During the presentation I provided an example as a way to better understand how we can use intersectional thinking in policy making in Scotland.

Consider the “Gender Representation on Public Board Act” passed in 2018. The purpose of this act is to increase the number of women on public boards in order to work towards fairer outcomes, given that the decisions made by these boards impact all our lives, therefore the decision makers should reflect society more accurately. This is correct, but what do we mean by “representation” here? If we only look at this through the prism of gender, we would be content with there being 50% women who all had the same backgrounds on public boards – this would not be representative. Instead, thinking through an intersectional lens, means that our efforts of outreach to engage women onto boards, must make specific and tailored efforts to open doors to women of colour, working class women, disabled women, women with caring responsibilities and more. If, as part of a public body responding to this act, it only engages in activities which attract or are accessible to women who are middle class, university educated and white, then the legislation cannot be deemed a success for all women or for fairer decision making.

Intersectional policy-making and the use of disaggregated data must become the norm if we are to make any real change to institutionalised inequalities in Scotland, and my hope is that the First Minister’s National Advisory Council on Women and Girls can be a platform to make this happen.

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