



Intersectional Feminist Frameworks

A PRIMER



CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) provides tools and research to organizations taking action to advance social justice and equality for all women. CRIAW recognizes women's diverse experiences and perspectives, creates spaces for developing women's knowledge, bridges regional isolation, and provides communication links among researchers and organizations actively working to promote social justice and women's equality.

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CONTENTS

4

INTRODUCTION

10

THE WAY FORWARD: SHIFTING TO IFFs

20

CHOOSING IFFs

23

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS





Introduction

While Canada has experienced substantial economic growth over the last decade, poverty continues to persist and grow in Canada. If you're a woman or child, you may be counted among those most affected. One in seven (2.4 million) women live in poverty in this country.¹

What's worse — if you are an Aboriginal woman, woman of colour, immigrant woman, woman with a disability, lone mother, or senior woman, you face an even greater chance of being counted among Canada's poor. In 2003, 38% of lone-parent families headed by mothers had incomes that were less than the after-tax Low Income Cut-offs. In comparison only 13% of lone-parent families headed by fathers, and 7% of two-parent families, faced this situation.²

These numbers tell us that despite the efforts of many different groups to end poverty and create a more just society, we've made little headway. In fact poverty is intensifying for those living closest to society's margins.

¹ CRIAW, (2005). Women and Poverty Fact sheet (3rd edition). Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

² Statistics Canada (2005). Women in Canada: a gender-based statistical report (5th ed).

After years of working towards greater equality for women, CRIAW believes that different approaches are needed to make real social and economic change—approaches that offer diverse contributions, and that work from Intersectional Feminist Frameworks (IFFs).

- Ability;
- Geographic location;
- Citizenship and nationalities; and/or
- Refugee and immigrant status.

Intersectional Feminist Frameworks aim to understand the many circumstances that combine with discriminatory social practices to produce and sustain inequality and exclusion.

IFFs offer alternative frameworks to viewing economic and social change which value and bring together the visions, directions and goals of women from very diverse experiences and different perspectives.

In this document CRIAW hopes to foster interest in IFFs and encourage their use by women's and social justice organizations.

A CASE FOR IFFs

Intersectional Feminist Frameworks (IFFs) aim to foster understanding of the many circumstances that combine with discriminatory social practices to produce and sustain inequality and exclusion. IFFs look at how systems of discrimination, such as colonialism and globalization, can impact the combination of a person's:

- Social or economic status;
- Race;
- Class;
- Gender;
- Sexuality;

UNDERSTANDING IFFs

While IFFs are not new, many social activists face an ongoing challenge of developing, understanding and applying these frameworks. However, CRIAW has identified emerging approaches and principles of IFFs that are based on countless conversations and represent many different views.

Some common underlying themes of IFFs include:

- Using tools for analysis that consider the complexities of women's lives;
- Making sure policy analysis is centred on the lives of those most marginalized;
- Attempting to think about women's lives in holistic ways when making policies;
- Valuing self-reflection in our social justice beliefs so that we are aware of how we are all caught up in systems of power and privilege;

- Fluid, changing, and continuously negotiated;
- Specific to the interaction of a person or group's history, politics, geography, ecology and culture;
- Based upon women's specific locations and situations rather than upon generalizations;
- Diverse ways to confront social injustices, which focus on many types of discrimination rather than on just one; and
- Locally and globally interconnected.

Intersectional Feminist Frameworks are fluid, specific, diverse, and interconnected both locally and globally.

- Integrating world views and knowledge that have historically been marginalized;
- Understanding that women's varying histories have created many social identities, which place them in different positions of hierarchical power;
- Making efforts to challenge binary thinking that sustains inequalities, such as able/disabled, gay/straight, white/black, man/woman, West/East, and North/South; and
- Revealing that this binary thinking is a result of unequal power relations.

From these themes it's clear that Intersectional Feminist Frameworks (IFFs) are:



The Way Forward: Shifting to IFFs

Organizations and individuals who actively engage with IFFs' approaches and principles can be sure to uproot some tensions and challenges, as previously held beliefs and focal points are reexamined. But the adoption of IFFs by policymakers and activists has the potential to generate equitable and broad-based social and economic change.

IFFs crack open oppressive structures and practices without ranking the fight against one oppression over the fight against another. Putting these types of frameworks in place is urgently needed if we hope to one-day see a just society.

PRACTICING IFFs IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POLICY WORK

Today's struggles for equality are being fought from many different levels and perspectives. The following two examples show concrete ways that IFFs could bring about new understandings and strategies for change. The first illustrates the use of IFFs in

understanding immigration and refugee policies, while the second takes a look at using IFFs to fight for an end to poverty.

Finally we offer an inside look at CRIAW's journey to adopt IFFs approaches and to better reflect diverse women's interests and experiences in our organization.

IMMIGRANT AND MIGRANT WOMEN — VIEWED THROUGH IFFs

Many activists and policy makers have applied Gender Based Analysis (GBA) to Canadian immigration policy and procedures to underscore the inequities faced by women applicants. But the reality of women crossing borders is much more complex than this analysis captures.

The following two situations highlight some of the strengths of using IFFs to address Canadian immigration policy and procedures.

1. Broadening the scope of analysis

GBA use in immigration law captures most women's reliance on male spouses because of the way the Canadian immigration classification system is structured." In this gendered dilemma immigrant and migrant women may face:

- Difficulty attending English/French language training programs;
- Isolation without English language training;
- Inadequate or unaffordable child care;
- Unemployment; and
- Lack of access to a social support network.

The reality of women crossing borders is much more complex than a gender based analysis can capture.

While gender plays a significant role, IFFs take note of many other factors of the immigration process to better understand the interlocking impact of racism, sexism, ageism and discrimination based on language, sexuality, and/or disability upon migrant women. These factors include the:

- Demand for poorly paid and highly skilled workers in Canada and other western countries;
- Connections between policies on trade, labour, citizenship, education, training, social welfare, health, military, national security and human rights; and
- Historical links between colonialism, nation formation, global economies and immigration policies.

II. Strengthening domestic worker advocacy

For years domestic worker advocacy groups have tried to challenge and change the government's Live-in Caregiver Program. This program forces foreign domestic workers to live with their employer as a visa condition.

There is sizeable evidence that women are more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and isolation as live-in workers. Even with this knowledge, Canada refuses to listen to advocacy groups and end the live-in requirement, and Canadians remain unaware of these workers' mistreatment.

At face value the Live-in Caregiver Program appears:

- Economically supportive of migrant women.
- Sympathetic to poor women migrating to Canada.
- Helpful for privileged women and families in Canada who require extensive child care.

Yet the live-in requirement results in workers being:

- Vulnerable to extended overtime hours without appropriate compensation, if any.
- Unable to take skills training courses.
- Unable to establish meaningful networks.
- Fearful of reporting any violation on the part of the employer.

IFFs can help build solid support and recognition for domestic workers by viewing gender alongside other forms of oppression that attempt to take away migrant women's power. A review of the

Live-in-Caregiver program by advocacy groups and the Canadian government through IFFs would:

- Expose the role of colonialism and Canada's racist and sexist immigration policies in shaping this program;
- Force this issue to become all of society's problem and not only the problem of the women facing the abuse;
- Reveal how immigration, employment standards, citizenship, and restrictive labour policies combine to exclude and limit equal treatment of racialized women;
- Show how Canada's lack of good quality, affordable child care spaces mean that affluent Canadian women and their families can meet their child care needs through this program, leading to the exploitation of many migrant women from the South, while lower-income women in Canada, including many women with disabilities, Aboriginal women, racialized women, and women living in rural areas, have few or no child care alternatives; and
- Explain the reluctance of governments to address unfair working conditions that are structured into the Live-In Caregiver Program.

ENDING POVERTY THROUGH IFFs

Many anti-poverty campaigns focus their fight upon income gaps created through capitalism. IFFs, however, provide tremendous opportunities for radically re-envisioning such campaigns. For example IFFs speak to the:

- Racialization of poverty through slavery, colonization, and labour migration;
- Social exclusion of women already pushed to the margins through limited access to housing, child care, education, social services, citizenship and a living wage; and

For CRIAW

- Enforcement of poverty through social and economical policies such as the Indian Act and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

As IFFs are used to deal with poverty, social systems that crush the poor become exposed. IFFs make it clear that poverty is not simply about finding and keeping a job, although that is important. It may also be about:

- Having access to one's culture, religion and language;
- Being part of a supportive community;
- Living in decent housing;
- Being accepted for who you are no matter what you look like; and
- Having access to health, education and welfare services where your dignity as a human being equal to all others is respected.

Fighting poverty is about fighting social injustice across many fronts.

CRIAW's JOURNEY AND IFFs

The road to being more inclusive and naming intersecting systems of inequality isn't easy when we are all working within hierarchical systems of power. Often it is easier to tackle one system of oppression at a time. CRIAW had to face these same challenges.

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How can CRIAW become truly representative of women's diverse struggles for equality?

Early on, CRIAW's board and staff received criticism for its homogenous nature. As a result, we did not reflect the many types of equality that women were seeking.

Initial attempts were made to become more inclusive by adding one single 'category' of women at a time to CRIAW's

structure. While this approach changed the face of CRIAW, it was also tokenistic and did not necessarily have broad-based support from different communities of women.

We began a more holistic approach that noted the absence of racialized, Aboriginal, disabled, lesbian and other marginalized women on the board, in our publications, conferences and alliances in the feminist movement.

Does our understanding of feminism connect with diverse anti-oppression struggles?

The feminist struggle has long been criticized for its applicability to the lives of all women. Fighting sexism alone will not necessarily end the oppressive barriers faced by many women.

In 1992 CRIAW held a feminism and anti-racism conference that began to address some intersecting issues. Women made connections between sexism and other equally oppressive barriers to social and economic equality. One of the first of its kind in Canada, the conference brought together over 1,000 participants who challenged CRIAW to deepen its analysis of women's lives.

We delved deeper into understanding how true change could happen by conducting our first study documenting how national women's organizations were making strides to become more inclusive and diverse.

Is there a better approach?

After three decades of confronting women's social and economic inequity we know these issues have only intensified for women.

The wake up call of seeing a steady reversal in women's status over the years, and our need to ensure gains for all women pushed us into action. Again we asked ourselves: is there a better approach?

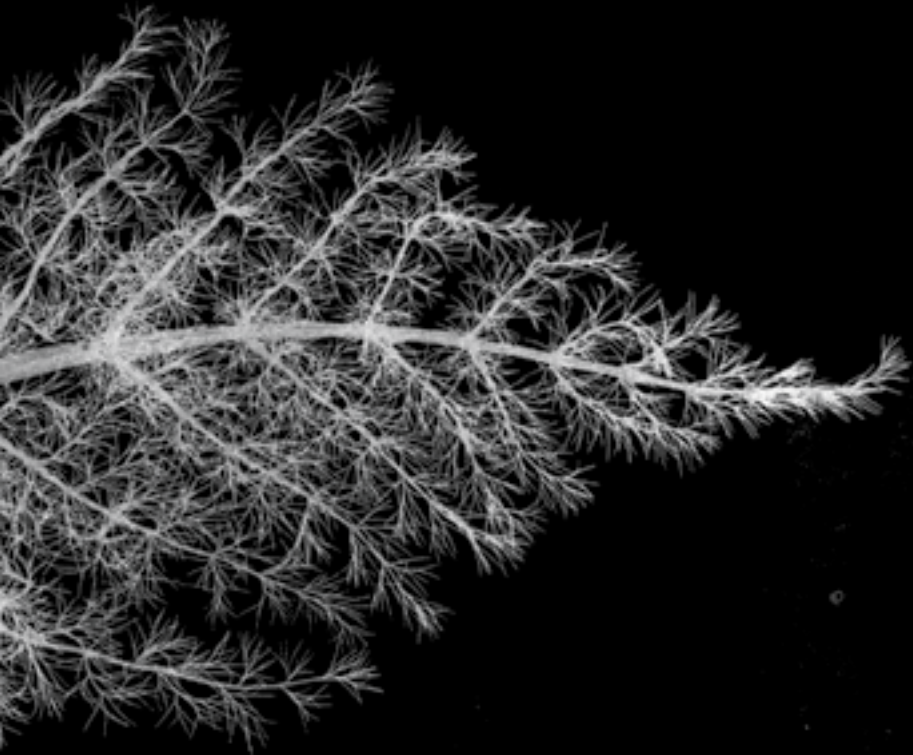
In 2004 CRIAW adopted a new board structure requiring representation from diverse regions and social groups. This shift challenged us to reflect upon our internal power structures. We decided to strive to be the vision we had for women in society.

The term Intersectional Feminist Frameworks came into being at a CRIAW-hosted think tank in 2005. IFFs now inform much of CRIAW's work in drawing attention to the experiences of marginalized women but it has been challenging to make this change.

The process of implementing IFFs has brought about tensions and struggles both internally and externally. People have had to set aside focusing on one existing framework to learn to open up to multiple perspectives and different voices.

CRIAW's transformation is still underway. Our organization's focus has shifted to rethinking internal structures and policies through the knowledge that many perspectives and different voices must inform all our work.

Choosing IFFs



IFFs are beginning to show signs of success for some organizations — particularly those with flexible structures open to change.

Recently one community and campus radio station surveyed its ethnic programming to find out which shows provided information and discussion on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered topics. This survey helped identify the need for expression of issues found within already marginalized groups. Station coordinators demonstrated IFFs' principles by:

- Challenging programmers to think about who their audience includes;
- Thinking about their listeners more holistically by offering more inclusive programming and messages; and
- Opening up a self-reflection process for the station's staff and the programmers' social justice beliefs.

How and where social justice and feminist activists begin their analysis depends on the specific conditions of the lives of those with whom they are working. It's important to remember that IFFs:

- Are flexible and open to shifts and changes in the political, social, economic and cultural order;
- Have multiple points of entry, engagement and discussion that cannot be determined in advance (i.e. gender may not be the most useful entry point to understand particular issues or situations);
- Can inform government policy and organizing strategies for activists in many different areas (i.e. labour, anti-poverty, immigration, environmental issues can be viewed from this framework);
- Are challenging to adopt — growing pains and tensions are part of the process as previous beliefs are reflected upon; and
- Aim to elicit broad-based social and economic change.

As women's movements are now globally connected, an expanded and diverse range of tools and resources for analysis and activism are available to challenge dominant powers. Shifting to IFFs is one way to access the range of marginalized knowledges that are available to social justice activists around the world.

CONTRIBUTORS

This primer was written in plain language by Jiselle Griffith. It is based on CRIAW's critical reflection piece *Intersectional Feminist Frameworks: An Emerging Vision* written by members of CRIAW's IFFs working group: Bénita Bunjun, Jo-Anne Lee, Lise Martin, Sara Torres and Marie-Katherine Waller.

CRIAW acknowledges the important contributions of Jo-Anne Lee's intellectual leadership and scholarship in the visioning, development, and implementation of Intersectional Feminist Frameworks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women respectfully acknowledges our presence on Aboriginal territories and recognizes the legacy of colonization upon the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

CRIAW is grateful to the IFFs working group for their time, effort and commitment to this challenging project. CRIAW also acknowledges the contributions of Michelle Mann, an independent consultant, and Una Lee, designer, for making the work more accessible. We appreciate your support and patience.

In turn, the working group thanks scholars and activists who have contributed to developing IFFs: Michelle K. Owen, past IFFs working group member; Tahira Gonsalves, past CRIAW research coordinator; IFFs roundtable and think tank participants; and CRIAW supporters, funders, and members who enable us to continue such critical feminist research, writings, and analysis.

The ideas expressed in this document are those of CRIAW and do not necessarily reflect those of the Women's Program, Status of Women, Canada.

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