

## The struggle against womens' oppression

# 'Intersectionality' politics on campus

Alongside decolonisation, 'intersectionality' has featured among the ideas debated by some students during the recent #FeesMustFall movement following the #RhodesMustFall protests at UCT demanding the removal of symbols of colonialism. An article on Decolonisation will feature in a future edition of Izwi, here we focus on intersectionality which as described below is a form of identity politics. This article is a summary adaptation of Hannah Sell's *Women: Identity Politics and the Struggle against Oppression*. The full version of the article can be found in the October 2015, Issue 192, of *Socialism Today* ([www.socialismtoday.org](http://www.socialismtoday.org)).

---

**Sheri Hamilton**

---

Although not as widespread in South Africa as in some western countries, intersectionality has found resonance among some, especially black women and LGBTI students at historically white universities. These students are rightly angry about and radicalised by their experience of sexism, racism, homophobia, prejudice and other forms of discrimination and oppression. In one sense, identity politics, like demands for decolonisation, forms part of the inevitable processes in the political awakening of oppressed groups within society. Recognising that you are oppressed, and that you can fight against your oppression through a common struggle with others who share the same oppression, can be a vital first step towards developing a socialist consciousness. But only if it leads on to an understanding of the class nature of capitalist society and the need for united, mass struggle.

Capitalism represented by the minority 1% is able to maintain its hold and dominance over the majority 99% through the divisions it is able to foment and reinforce among the oppressed through race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion and all the other



*Recent violence between feminist and queer activists and #FeesMustFall protesters at Wits University has put the question of identity politics on the agenda of the student movement.*

identities that are constructed to serve as a barriers to class unity and human solidarity. Whilst identity politics is the starting point for most if not all activists and those involved in struggle may see this mainly as a means to fight back, the form of identity politics that has emanated from the universities and has dominated over recent decades concentrates overwhelmingly on discussing personal experiences of oppression rather than trying to find the means to end it. This includes all the strands of identity politics that have become more prominent in recent years, such as intersectionality and privilege theory. These theories remain little known in wider society but have become commonplace in, for example, university feminist societies.

Intersectionality at South African universities have correctly served to highlight the violence and oppression of especially women and LGBTI groups. Recently this violence was graphically displayed in the physical confrontation between black feminists and LGBTI groups and the representatives of convenors of a meeting at Wits claiming to represent the national #FeesMustFall movement from which the former were excluded. Acts of violence and oppression

against women and LGBTI groups should be condemned in the strongest terms and measures should be instituted to combat such acts including through programmes to raise the level of political consciousness within the #FeesMustFall movement.

However, because intersectionalists have failed to identify the roots of what divides the oppressed, their methods often serve to reinforce such divisions rather than to act as source of building the unity of the oppressed. Intersectionalists argue that different oppressions 'intersect'. Indeed, they do: a black working-class woman is triply oppressed, for example. But intersectionalists often see their role as cataloguing and describing oppressions and their intersections rather than abolishing them.

Supporters of 'privilege theory', another variant of identity politics, are best known for telling people to 'check their privilege'. The founder of privilege theory, Peggy McIntosh, argued that a white, upper-class, heterosexual man, for example, is carrying around an 'invisible knapsack' full of unearned privileges. The argument goes that power is not concentrated in the hands of one class, or in the state, but is spread throughout society and therefore

exists in all social and interpersonal relationships. Privilege theory further states that every individual is part of a multiplicity of oppressive relationships. It concentrates overwhelmingly on exhortations to individuals to change, to 'check' their privilege. Therefore as part of the patriarchal system, an unemployed working class black man is an oppressor.

To suggest as some of these theories do that power is not concentrated in one class is to completely misunderstand the nature of capitalism. Today, wealth and power is concentrated in fewer hands – the owners of the major banks and corporations – even than when Marx was writing. According to Oxfam, the richest 85 people on earth – a double-decker bus full – have as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population. The richest 85 include five women and one African, although white men predominate. Their role in society, however, does not stem primarily from their colour or gender but that they are part of a tiny super-wealthy ruling elite.

While there have been significant improvements in social attitudes to different forms of oppression in recent decades, they have not resulted in the ending of the oppressions concerned. Blatant sexism is no longer acceptable in the way it would have been in the past, particularly in the economically advanced capitalist countries. Women have won greater rights in recent decades. There are different factors that have led to this, including the development of improved and widely available contraception. In South Africa, despite its ranking as one of the most violent societies against women and children, the open display of sexist attitudes have been checked by the normative influence of the rights of women enshrined in the Constitution.

Nonetheless, women continue to be oppressed. This oppression stems, not merely from the attitudes of men, but from the role of women and the family in capitalist and earlier class societies.. The idea remains deeply ingrained that women are possessions of men and that we need to be loyal and obedient to our partners, and that violence and coercion are acceptable means for men to achieve that, both towards 'their' women and 'their' children.

In many neo-colonial countries, the oppression of women is more brutal and severe than in the economically developed countries. This brutality is extended to LGBTI groups in the form of corrective rape and in some countries in Africa the death sentence. Historically, practices such as honour killings have been carried out by all religions. Even today these horrendous practices and others - like enforced suicides of widows and dowries

for brides - are carried out under the banner of different religions. In South Africa, many of the rights of women are either being challenged by traditionalists or are being eroded by the re-emergence of traditional practices such as ukuthwala (forced kidnapping of young women to be married), the commercialisation of lobola (bride price), virginity testing and because many, especially working class women are unable to access their rights. Traditionalists have become emboldened in enforcing the oppressive and exploitative practices recognised in customary law because they are being courted by the ruling ANC government in exchange for delivery of the rural vote. So brazen have some of these traditionalists become that a mayor of a KZN municipality is using state resources to offer bursaries in exchange for regular virginity testing by recipients. Some researchers argue that there is a direct correlation between these customs and the level of violence against women in South Africa where about 150 women report being raped to the police daily. Fewer than 30 of the cases will be prosecuted, and no more than 10 will result in a conviction. This translates into an overall conviction rate of 4% - 8% of reported rapes.

While no longer legal or openly acceptable, marital rape is still widespread and rarely punished. At the same time, women continue to bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities despite increasingly also going out to work. In many cases women are still, as the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky put it, the 'slaves of slaves'. While in Britain, for example, most studies show men accepting that they should do an equal amount of domestic chores as women, there is still a considerable gap between intentions and reality. In Africa as a whole, sharing domestic chores is still quite rare and in South Africa, this burden is compounded by the fact that over a million women are compelled to do domestic work. For these women there is no escape from the drudgery of domestic work because they have to do it twice, at home for no payment and at the workplace for the lowest pay.

It is true, therefore, that men get some gain from women's disproportionate bearing of the domestic burden, in having a few more hours of leisure time. The main gain, however, is for capitalism. By putting the main burden of domestic life, the bringing up of the next generation (from which the future workforce is drawn), and caring for the sick and elderly on women, they are removed from the responsibility of society as a whole.

To say that social relations in modern society are capitalist relations is not to take an 'economic determinist' view of society: arguing that every aspect of the

'superstructure' of society – the state, politics, culture, social attitudes and so on – are rigidly determined by the character of the economy. On the contrary, there is an inter-relationship between the two. At the same time, politics and social attitudes reflect not only the current character of capitalism but also remnants of the past and – particularly in mass struggles of the working class and the oppressed – the seeds of a potential better future. Nonetheless, it is clear that as long as we live in a capitalist society, where wealth and power rests with the tiny elite who own and control industry, science and technology, then the superstructure of that society will also ultimately reflect and act in the interests of that ruling elite.

Capitalism shapes the outlook of all of us from the time we are born, with all of the distortions of the human personality that creates. This includes how we are expected to behave appropriately for our given gender. It is not possible to fully escape this; in this society capitalist gender roles are an objective reality. Even rejecting capitalist gender norms means reacting to, and therefore being affected by, those norms. It is not possible to prescribe exactly how human relations, including the role of gender, would flower in the future when freed from the rigid straitjackets imposed by capitalism.

The crucial issue for anyone determined to end oppression, therefore, is how to end capitalism and begin to build a world that is free of oppression. Today, just as when Marx described the working class as the 'grave digger of capitalism', it is the key force on the planet capable of ridding us of this bankrupt system. Both privilege theory and intersectionality would list social class – what they would describe as 'classism' – as one form of oppression. However, it features as one item on a list and is often discussed in terms of the prejudice people face because of having a working-class accent or postcode. The centrality of class in the structure of society is not recognised. The basic idea that a Nigerian worker would have more in common with a worker in Britain or the US than they would with Aliko Dangote, the only African to make it on to the list of the richest 85 on the planet, would not be understood. The fact that it is the working class that is ultimately responsible for the creation of the capitalists' profits and that by collective action it is capable of bringing capitalist society to a halt is discounted as outmoded.

While determined mass struggle can force capitalism to adapt to a certain extent – as has been the case with LGBT rights, equal pay legislation and other measures – but permanent and deep-rooted change will only be achieved by the socialist transformation of society.