

Intersectionality

- An approach to embedding gender processes into specific historical, cultural, and economic/political contexts.

Amina Mama's Notes on Gender stress the historical specificity of the operation of gender, and Oyewumi considers carefully how this operation was, and is, placed within the organization of different societies: where and when is "*gendering*" a central political and cultural force? How, for example, does "*gendering*" interact with the dominance of class construction, or the weight of colonial influences?

We can begin to answer this question by returning to the theoretical model of "sex" and "*becoming gendered*". If we ask seriously about the way in which class constructions, for example, influence the process of "*becoming gendered*", we could imagine "*class*" as a colour which we could place holistically over the model we've been using to describe the predictions which flow between '*sexing*' a baby and "*gendering*" a human being. That would mean that every aspect of the model (how someone lives in relation to labour, authority, performance, and sexuality, as a result of their identification as "*boy/man*"/"*girl/woman*") would be influenced by the operation of class in the society.

Very simply put, class is a social system which seeks to organize labour, through a hierarchical relation to what is classically termed ownership of the means of production. The system organizes people in the interests of those who are "*owners*", and these interests are best served through the accumulation of capital in systems where the majority sell their labour for much less than the worth of the products that labour creates. Ownership of the means of production (land, corporate systems of financing, technical equipment, mass material, etc) is restricted, through the operation of class systems, to a minority.

Putting the "*colour-of-class*" over the sex/gender model, therefore would involve recognizing that class itself creates divisions between people (and rationalizes those divisions as "*normal*"). In most countries, for example, a tiny minority of the population hold ownership of the means of production, a slightly larger group live with relative independence over their own labour and have access, as a result, to multiple resources, and the majority of the population struggle to sell their labour at minimal wage, are unemployed, or access informal trading as a way of surviving.

What would these realities mean for understanding gender? Perhaps the easiest way to think about this would be to explore “*class*” through certain opportunities which get organized via class in such as the provision of electricity, access to safe water (inside a domestic structure), access to services (medical services, legal services, educational services), protection from the climate, opportunities for mobility. If someone was born, for example, into an environment without electricity, how would that impact upon a “*gendering process*”?

Obviously, one would need to know more about the context in which there was no electricity to develop a complex response to the question. However, it is clear that without electricity other resources need to be found to ensure light and warmth are available. It is likely that the organization of work will include work around the collection of sources for fuel, and that responsibilities for this will be allocated. Gender is likely to be one of the lines around which this organization occurs. In villages without electricity, the work of collecting fuel, heating water and food, and ensuring that the domestic space is as warm as possible is usually allocated to women. So is the work of collecting water, and using water in all spaces (for domestic purposes and for subsistence farming). In environments where getting heat and light occur through the use of electricity, there are no gender roles assigned to switching on lights, running bath water, or ensuring that there is water in the geyser (gender roles may get assigned to certain forms of labour associated with the use of electricity - cooking, housecleaning, paying electricity bills, etc). This is just a simple example to show how “becoming gendered” involves the practical, day-to-day, realities which flow from class systems.

In countries where class structure has been intricately dependent on racialization (like South Africa), and upon racism, it is extremely difficult to separate talk about class from talk about race. It is important that we do make this separation because constructions of race, and the way in which these constructions have been deployed in order to legitimize massive and complex discriminations, infuse most of the contemporary societies. Constructions of race - “*becoming racialized*” — are as powerful as constructions of gender, and in some cases it has been argued that they are more powerful than constructions of gender. Some historians of apartheid - at all levels of “*voice*” - argue, for example, that the sheer weight of the oppressive legal and economic machinery of the South African government concretized “*race*” as a central meaning for all people whose lives were caught up into the tight mesh of control fuelled by apartheid’s policies. Being racialized as “*black*” by the apartheid government had devastating effects on every aspect of daily life: economic opportunity, mobility, education, recognition as a citizen of the country you were born into, and so on. Being racialized as “*black*” also structured avenues of opposition to

these policies, and provided the platform for political and cultural celebrations of un-colonized and independent “*blackness*” (such as you can find in Steve Biko’s *I Write What I Like* in the early 70’s). Others argue that “*being gendered*” (as a man or a woman) interacted very intimately with “*being racialized*” for South Africans living under apartheid - in terms of labour, for example, it was people gendered as “*men*” who were forced into migrant labour, while people gendered as “*women*” were expected to stay with their children, attempting to create independent livelihoods out of nothing, separated from husbands and fathers for eleven months of the year. There are more contemporary writers (Sisonke Msimang, and Shireen Hassim) who agree with this perspective, arguing that in contemporary South African, the way you become “*a person*”, the way you become integrated into meaning, identity, and possibilities for survival within South African involve all the experiences which flow from racialization, from “*becoming gendered*”, and from questions of culture, class, and sexuality.

It requires a lot of thought, and skill, to explore contexts as though race, class, and gender matter. Without such skill, however, understanding gender is likely to be a one-dimensional process, and vulnerable to over-generalizations based on the realities of a single context. Intersectional approaches to gender are valuable in building up a rich image of how, and where, political dynamics work to open up, and close down, space and opportunity.

Ayesha Imam describes intersectionality like this:

The crucial question is how to understand the interweaving of class, gender, imperial relations, etc. One mode of doing so has been to see it in terms of race relations plus class relations plus gender relations. This has been criticised for leading to the setting up of hierarchies of the oppressed, which are helpful neither to understanding nor to political practice.... For most ... class, race, and gender are simultaneous forces, both interwoven and recursive upon each other. As Brewer puts it ... the mode of analysis is not “*race + class + gender*” but “*race X class X gender*”... in any particular situation, the interweaving of class, race, and gender forms a context which is constituted of the melding (melting, welding, blending together) of these relationships...

Imam’s theory of intersectionality expresses an approach to understanding gender that refuses to prioritize one social force (race, class, gender) over another, in the interests of creating the richest possible analysis.

It would however be important to recognize that Imam’s choices of relevant forces is itself determined by context. She looks at “*race*”, “*class*”, and “*gender*” here. In some contexts, these

might not be the most relevant dynamics in explaining how a particular society operated. In India, for example, caste and religious affiliation have played, and continue to play, critical political roles; in many African countries, race is less economically and politically powerful than ethnicity; we have seen, in Oyewumi's chapter, how lineage and seniority may have played defining roles in shaping pre-colonial Yoruba society. In any context, then, it is first going to be important to consider which social forces interact most forcefully to create conditions for life within that society, and then to explore the way in which becoming gendered interacts with those forces.

Intersectional analysis of gender allows for in-depth exploration of subjectivity: the complex sense of "*self*" through which negotiation with the world is possible. Secondly, intersectional analysis of gender allows for examination of political actions, and movements, which are often organized in relation to solidarities formed through the interests of a particular "*class*," "*race*" and/or/together with "*gender*".