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Hannah J. Dawson, Siviwe Mhlana & Ingrid Lynch (2026) Intersectionality in action: learnings from development research in the Global South, Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement, 47:1, 123-147, DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2026.2625175

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement

ISSN: 0225-5189 (Print) 2158-9100 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcjd20

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To cite this article: Hannah J. Dawson, Siviwe Mhlana & Ingrid Lynch (2026) Intersectionality in action: learnings from development research in the Global South, Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue canadienne d'études du développement, 47:1, 123-147, DOI: 10.1080/02255189.2026.2625175

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2026.2625175

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Published online: 05 Mar 2026.

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CANADIAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
REVUE CANADIENNE D'ÉTUDES DU DÉVELOPPEMENT
2026, VOL. 47, NO. 1, 123–147
https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2026.2625175

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Intersectionality in action: learnings from development research in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

While intersectionality holds much promise for recognising and addressing multiple forms of inequality and driving social change, it remains underused – and often depoliticised – in development research. As its uptake has been growing, concerns have emerged that decontextualised applications of the concept will dilute its transformative potential. This article examines these debates from a Global South perspective and explores the opportunities and challenges of operationalising intersectionality in research and praxis. Drawing on International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-funded studies and collaborations with southern organisations, we identify three principles for generating intersectional insights. Our analysis highlights synergies and tensions with other transformative methodologies and argues that southern perspectives are essential to sustaining intersectionality's political force and transformative potential.

RÉSUMÉ

L'intersectionnalité est très prometteuse pour reconnaître et traiter les multiples formes d'inégalité et favoriser le changement social, mais elle reste sous-utilisée – et souvent dépolitisée – dans la recherche sur le développement. À mesure que son adoption se généralise, des inquiétudes ont émergé quant au fait que des applications hors contexte diluent son potentiel transformateur. Cet article examine ces débats dans une perspective du Sud et explore les opportunités et les défis liés à la mise en œuvre de l'intersectionnalité dans la recherche et la pratique. En nous appuyant sur des études financées par le CRDI et sur des collaborations avec des organisations du Sud, nous identifions trois principes permettant de générer des connaissances intersectionnelles. L'analyse met en évidence les synergies et les tensions avec d'autres méthodologies transformatrices et soutient que les perspectives du Sud sont essentielles pour maintenir la force politique et le potentiel transformateur de l'intersectionnalité.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 September 2025
Accepted 30 December 2025

KEYWORDS
Intersectionality; inequality; global south; development research; social justice

Introduction

Intersectionality has become central to understanding and addressing overlapping forms of inequality, a reality made especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis

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underscored how intersecting differences in class, race or caste, as well as gender and geographic location produce profoundly uneven economic and health outcomes. Well before COVID-19, however, development researchers, funders, activists and organisers were already urging the adoption of intersectional approaches to tackle inequality and social injustice (Christoffersen 2017; Hankivsky 2012; Hunting and Hankivsky 2020; Lynch, Fluks, and Essop 2022). Policy documents now frequently reference intersectionality – such as a multi-agency guide on evaluating the Sustainable Development Goals – but often without clarifying what this entails in practice (Bamberger, Segone, and Tateossian 2017, 24). It is only recently that UN agencies have begun publishing guidance and toolkits on how to adopt or operationalise intersectionality. In 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) released guidelines on incorporating an 'intersectional gender lens' (WHO 2020), followed by the UN Women and the UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' (UNPRPD) Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit in 2021(UN Women and UNPRPD 2021).

Despite growing calls to embed an intersectional approach into development research and policy (Bailey et al. 2019; Choo and Ferree 2010; Hankivsky 2012), the existing scholarship on intersectionality remains heavily concentrated in the Global North. This reflects long-standing colonial logics in development research, which cast Northern theories as universal and relegate Global South scholarship to locally situated 'data' rather than sites of conceptual innovation. There is also relatively little empirical work examining the possibilities, challenges and implications of applying intersectionality in development research and practice (Addinsall, Rihai, and Andre 2023; Grünenfelder and Schurr 2015), and what exists rarely offers generalisable principles for research that seek to bridge knowledge and action in order to inform policy change and tackle complex social problems.

At the same time, the mainstreaming of intersectionality has sparked significant global debate. Researchers and activists in the Global South contest the concept's origins and express concerns about its decontextualised applications (Banerjee and Ghosh 2018; Menon 2015; Velayudhan 2018). Many argue that intersectionality is too often reduced to recognising identities rather than interrogating power relations and the structures that sustain them (Menon 2015; Salem 2018), risking a depoliticisation of what began as a praxis-oriented analytic emerging from Black feminist activism. As the term travels through technocratic and bureaucratic settings, it has also become a site of conceptual stretching, methodological confusion and political contestation, raising questions about whether it can retain its transformative potential to challenge intersecting systems of domination. Global South scholars have worked to adapt intersectionality to local histories of inequality and expand its scope, but resource constraints, political repression and donor priorities have shaped whether it has been applied in genuinely transformative ways or merely invoked symbolically.

Against this backdrop, this paper draws insights from eight research studies supported by Canada' International Development Research Centre (IDRC). These studies were part of a collaborative project with the University of the Witwatersrand's Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) in 2022–2023, which critically assessed the application of an intersectional approach to development research. The studies address inequalities in online hate speech, forest-based livelihoods, gender-based violence, informal work and violent extremism in diverse Global South contexts. The analysis identifies three generalisable principles for deriving intersectional insights in development research: grounding

research in context, applying rigour and ethics in selecting social categories and embracing methodological plurality. These principles contribute to ongoing debates on how to operationalise intersectionality while underscoring the risks of imposing it at the expense of other valuable approaches. The paper concludes with some words of caution against the depoliticisation of intersectionality as it gains institutional traction, and underscores the imperative to amplify Southern voices and perspectives in shaping its future trajectories.

Defining and operationalising intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality has become more prominent in development research and policy over the past few years. Advocates consider it a crucial perspective for understanding the interconnected ways in which privilege and oppression manifest, as well as how inequalities are experienced both between and within countries. This approach is seen as valuable for crafting targeted, context-specific policy interventions to address inequalities and diverse social problems. Despite its growing prominence in development agendas, particularly through adoption by global development organisations such as the United Nations (Yuval-Davis 2006), debates have surfaced on its origins, relevance and usefulness. This is especially notable among scholars and activists in the Global South (Banerjee and Ghosh 2018; Menon 2015; Velayudhan 2018).

Origins

Popular understandings of intersectionality often trace its origins to United States legal doctrine; however, its historical roots in the global struggle for Black liberation predate its academic conception in Black feminist thought. While Global South feminists have seldom explicitly described their experiences as 'intersectional,' the extensive literature on the role of women in economic development shows that women have long organised around their common identities as wives, mothers and workers in society. Thus, in Africa, the genealogy of intersectionality can be traced back to as early as the nineteenth century in the various struggles against colonialism, domination and exploitation that women led since the Aba Women's Riots in South-Eastern Nigeria in 1929 (Abaraonye 1998). Similarly, in the United States, intersectionality can already be seen in the assertions of Black abolitionists and women's rights activists who began to speak out about their unique vulnerabilities at the intersection of race, gender and class in society (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023).

Building on these earlier foundations, Black women theorists and activists such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks and members of the Combahee River Collective (CRC) employed an intersectional approach to advocate against the exclusion of Black women's experiences from wider movements for racial and gender equality. Reflecting on the compounding oppressions of women, CRC's 1977 'A Black Feminist Statement' laid out a comprehensive framework for understanding Black women's systemic and interlocking oppressions of racism, sexism and patriarchy in society. The following quote illustrates CRC's understanding of the intersecting nature of Black women's experiences and subjectivities within the American social structure:

> We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice

> based on the fact that the major systems are interlocking … The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives … We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. (CRC 1977 as cited in Collins and Blige 2020, 79)

In academic scholarship, the concept of intersectionality is most frequently attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar in the United States. In the 1980s, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality to illuminate how race and gender identities intersected to shape the distinct experiences of discrimination faced by Black women in the workplace (Crenshaw 1991). Her work drew significant inspiration from Black feminist movements in the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s, such as the Combahee River Collective, that emphasised interconnections between race, sex, gender and class.

The concept of intersectionality has since been expanded across several disciplines in the social sciences (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Yet, much of this scholarship continues to centre perspectives from the Global North – particularly North America – often overlooking the diverse realities and intellectual traditions of the Global South. Hence, scholars argue that the widespread adoption of intersectionality in international policy and academic settings has led to its depoliticisation and separation from its roots in critical racial thought (Sondarjee and Andrews 2022). Ironically, the concept that aims to highlight the marginalisation of certain groups in society has itself faced criticism for marginalising racialised people as thinkers and producers of knowledge relevant for understanding and transforming the world. This has led to a simplification of the concept's purpose, reducing it to merely describing individuals' experiences and conditions in society, but without any real effort to bring about change.

However, research reveals intersectionality's rich intellectual and cultural heritage in global emancipatory struggles. Long before intersectionality gained prominence in the United States and academic discourse, it was already embedded in various feminist traditions across the Global South (Hassim 2023; Menon 2015). The social, political and economic conditions in these contexts necessitated attention to the multiple identity categories shaping people's experiences – an approach long central to addressing the intersecting oppressions of historically marginalised groups.

Intersectionality in the Global South has unique historical roots that stem from interconnected struggles against colonialism, patriarchy, racism, nationalism and neoliberal capitalism. Feminist movements in these contexts evolved concurrently with, and were influenced by, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-caste struggles (Hassim 2023). These social and political movements challenged diverse forms of oppression and advocated for social justice on multiple fronts. In India, for instance, the non-Brahman movements of the early 1900s and the rise of Dalit movements in the 1960s, which actively opposed caste-based discrimination and a hierarchical social order, have long shaped feminist theorising (Gurumurthy, Rajkumar, and Ashraf 2023; Menon 2015; Velayudhan 2018). As Nivedita Menon (2015, 38) notes, women's movements in the South did not begin with a universalised idea of 'Woman' that was later complicated by other identities, but instead understood gender as always embedded in national, caste and communal contexts.

In South Africa, this has been evident in women's organising in the early 1950s through movements such as the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW), a broad-based women's organisation that aimed to advance the rights of women

through the promotion of workers' rights, human rights, family rights and the advancement of peace and equality nationally and internationally (FEDSAW 1954). This was exemplified by the 1956 Women's March, which FEDSAW, representing 230,000 South African women, organised to oppose the proposed expansion of pass laws by the Apartheid government (South African History Archive 2025). Therefore, for FEDSAW, the pursuit of women's rights was deeply intertwined with the broader struggle for liberation against Apartheid and what Neville Alexander (1979, 253) has described as 'racial capitalism' (Mhlana forthcoming).

Similarly, in Brazil, Lélia Gonzalez – now considered one of the foremost intellectuals of Afro-Brazilian feminisms – was a key vice in the Brazilian Black anti-racist movements during the 1970s and 1980s military dictatorship. Her activism and writings underscored the need to 'always think race, class, and gender in relation' (Barreto 2020, 15). Although she never used the term, Gonzalez is now seen as an original thinker and early practitioner of a 'locally rooted intersectionality' (Valente and Martins 2023, 11).

Shreya Atrey (2019, 64) identifies noteworthy parallels in the language and explanations of the Black feminist movements in the U.S. and feminisms in the Global South. In the 1960s, while white feminists in the United States were mobilising against patriarchy and advocating for the recognition of women's unpaid work in the home (Federici 2012), Black feminists criticised this approach, highlighting that the white Fordist model of the male breadwinner and dependent housewife was not reflective of the reality of the majority of oppressed and working people in the world. In fact, the experiences of racialised and working women in the North closely resembled those of women in colonised and newly liberated countries in the South. As American Black liberation scholar and activist, Angela Davis, highlights in her seminal contribution, 'Women, Race and Class':

> Black wives and mothers, usually workers as well; have rarely been offered the time and energy to become experts at domesticity … [They] have had to do their own housekeeping and other women's home chores as well. And frequently, the demands of the job in a white woman's home have forced the domestic worker to neglect her own home and even her own children. As paid housekeepers they have been called upon to be surrogate wives and mothers in millions of white homes. (1983, 232–238)

Likewise, in her autobiographical thesis, 'Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life,' South African trade unionist and liberation activist, Emma Mashinini (2012), described her experience of oppression as a woman, worker, wife and mother living under Apartheid in the 1960s and 1980s. In this revolutionary account, she illustrates how the Apartheid system of racial and capitalist patriarchy shaped her experience of being and of interconnected subjectivity in the home, community and the workplace. However, the genealogies of intersectionality originating in the Global South remain obscured amid the current resurgence and widespread adoption of the term.

Conceptualising intersectionality

The wide appeal of intersectionality has led to its diverse use across disciplines and by various scholarly and activist communities. Rather than a singular theoretical framework, it is often understood as a critical lens or analytical prompt that can be applied in diverse ways across disciplines and contexts (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Nash 2008).

These debates have prompted efforts to clarify how intersectionality can be effectively operationalised in both research, policy and praxis.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has been especially influential in framing intersectionality as a metaphor and heuristic – tools that, together, provide 'a conceptual foundation for intersectionality's heterogeneous practices' (Collins et al. 2021, 693). Collins introduced the concept of the 'matrix of domination' to understand how Black women in the U.S. experience interlocking systems of oppression, particularly race and gender (Collins 1990). The matrix underscores the interconnectedness of systems of power, moving beyond additive models to show how race, gender, class and other axes of inequality overlap and influence one another in complex ways to sustain a status quo of inequality. The matrix of domination is composed of four distinctive yet interconnected domains of power: structural, cultural, disciplinary and interpersonal.[1]

Collins is careful to avoid seeing social categories in essentialised or reductive ways. Instead, she acknowledges that individuals can experience multiple, intersecting forms of identity and oppression, which manifest differently based on how systems of oppression converge at various points across multiple domains of power. This framework suggests a multifaceted approach for investigating how complex power relations converge to shape individual experiences and life-chances.

Operationalising intersectionality

This framework was taken up further in Collins' later work, which aimed to show how the idea of intersectionality could be operationalised by researchers. Collins and Blige (2016) described the pursuit of a fair and more equitable society as being at the heart of all intersectional research and praxis and identified six core themes for operationalising intersectionality in research: *inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity and social justice.* Misra, Curington, and Green (2021) take Collins and Bilge's framework further and put forth a blueprint for applying a more intentional intersectional lens when designing research. In their six intersectional 'methodological tenets' they combine inequality, power and social justice into one concept: *oppression*, which they then link to *relationality*. *Complexity* and *context* index that inequality expresses itself in complex, context-specific ways, with socially constructed differences being interlinked and relational. They add to the list *comparison* that looks at the outcomes or impacts on diverse groups, and *deconstruction*, a method to destabilise categorical differences.

Intersectionality can be applied to diverse methodological approaches (Misra, Curington, and Green 2021). While some critique it for lacking precision and validity compared to traditional research approaches (Collins and Blige 2020), its flexibility allows it to adapt to diverse methodologies and forms of analysis (Rice, Harrison, and Friedman 2019). This adaptability, as later sections will show, is particularly evident in activist research traditions – such as action research, participatory action research and knowledge coproduction – which all seek to bridge knowledge and action to inform policy change.

Methodology

This paper is the product of a collaborative research project led by the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS) at the University of the Witwatersrand and supported by

Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Given the dearth of research on how to apply an intersectional lens in development research and policy, the project provided an opportunity to critically evaluate intersectionality's relevance for development initiatives in the Global South and engage with the key debates and tensions surrounding its application. Specifically, it aimed to synthesise insights on the possibilities and limits of applying an intersectional approach to research aimed at social and policy change in the Global South.

SCIS partnered with eight advocacy and policy-orientated organisations in the Global South who critically reflected on their understanding and engagement with intersectionality in an IDRC-supported research project (see Table 1). These organisations were selected based on criteria set by the project team, which prioritised the incorporation of an intersectional lens – whether or not explicitly named – across three dimensions[2]: (i) research framing, (ii) methodological choices, and (iii) dissemination and application of findings.

This focus reflected the project's interest in documenting how projects incorporated intersectionality throughout the research process, while also acknowledging its limited explicit use in project documents. Some projects applied elements of an intersectional lens without using the term, while others used the term but did not consistently apply it throughout the project. Additionally, several projects combined intersectionality with other transformative approaches (e.g. gender-transformative approach) and activist methodologies (e.g. participatory action research), highlighting the need to explore their alignment and tensions, which we discuss in the next section. Out of an initial eighteen

Table 1. Case study organisations and project focus.

Organisation(s)	IDRC-supported research project	Country	Policy issues/IDRC focus areas
IT for Change	A research project to combat gender-based hate speech against women in India	India	Inclusive governance
Internet Lab	A research project to combat gender-based hate speech against women in Brazil	Brazil	Inclusive governance
Society for the Study of Women's Health (SSWH)	Shifting Gender Norms for Improved Maternal and Adolescent Health in The Gambia and Ghana	Gambia and Ghana	Health
American University of Beirut	Reproductive rights in times of conflict: a qualitative exploratory study of the lived experiences of GBV among Syrian refugee women in Lebanon	Lebanon	Health
Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) and American Jewish World Service (AJWS)	Pathways to gender-transformative change: Using evidence towards effective public systems to address gender-based violence in India	India	Health
Women and Media Collective (WMC)	Women's agency and the gendered impact of violent extremism in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India	Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India	Inclusive governance
Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)	Covid-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study	Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Mexico, Thailand, India	Inclusive economies
ForestAction Nepal	Economic empowerment of women through forest solutions	Nepal	Climate and food and inclusive economies

projects, eight case studies were selected to cover different policy issues in international development and IDRC focus areas (climate/food, health, education, science and technology, inclusive governance and inclusive economies), geographies, and methodological approaches (see Table 1).

The three key principles for deriving intersectional insights, discussed below, were derived through a two-step process: an extensive literature review and an analysis of case study reports. From February to November 2023, researchers and practitioners from the eight organisations participated in a monthly online 'community of inquiry' (Garrison 2017) during which they reflected on and discussed the practical application of intersectionality. These sessions featured robust debate on the concept's origins, its distinctiveness from alternative approaches and possibilities for reimagining its scope. Each organisation produced a case study report (see titles below) documenting their engagement with intersectionality in an IDRC-supported research project. We analysed these reports to distil key learnings and identify common principles. Our findings are grounded not only in the case study reports but also in the collective insights shared during the monthly discussions. It is worth noting that the term *vulnerabilities* is used in several of the case studies. While this can inadvertently draw attention to individuals rather than the structural conditions that produce marginalisation, the studies underscore the economic, social and political forces underpinning differentiated outcomes, and our analytical framing remains focused on the intersecting systems of power that generate those vulnerabilities.

Research and action intertwined

The organisations involved in this collaborative research project, whose case study reports inform this paper, consider research and action as intricately linked and mutually informing. Their mandates centre on producing research that supports advocacy, movement building and policy development. Thus, research is not merely a tool for knowledge gathering but a catalyst for social change. While some academic researchers hold this same commitment, their institutions often lack resources to bridge knowledge-action gaps, limiting the potential for what Townsend-Bell (2009) describes as 'intersectional praxis.' Intersectional praxis goes beyond understanding how power structures shape intersecting identities and vulnerabilities. It aims to act on these insights to end 'relations of dominance' (Townsend-Bell 2009, 3) and bring about social change. In this section, we offer a snapshot of each organisation and their IDRC-supported study that sought to bridge knowledge on the differentiated vulnerabilities and forms of discrimination (primarily affecting women) – in contexts such as online spaces, informal work and access to sexual and reproductive health services – with action to drive policy change. While women are the primary focus across these studies, we recognise that gender-diverse people also face unique, intersecting vulnerabilities, and we do not intend to reduce gender to a binary.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), a global research advocacy network dedicated to improving the working conditions of the working poor, particularly women, in the informal economy, has a significant track record of generating actionable data to support their grassroots worker base. Through foregrounding knowledge coproduction with informal workers, WIEGO ensures that research supports movement building and informs both local and global advocacy efforts. Their 'COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy study' was designed to

assess the impact of the pandemic on the working poor, particularly regarding their lives, livelihoods and health. It generated critical data on the differentiated vulnerabilities among informal workers that informed recovery efforts, government policies, worker advocacy and academic discourse on the pandemic.

Similarly, InternetLab, a policy-oriented research organisation based in São Paulo, Brazil, produces evidence-based analyses to advocate for rights-oriented internet policy. Their 'Recognise-Resist-Remedy' project, initiated in 2019, revealed how online hate speech against women intersects with race, class and sexuality. They used these insights to evaluate legal and internet platform responses and influence internet policy discussions.

ForestAction, a policy research and advocacy organisation in Nepal, partners with grassroots associations and industry federations to influence public policy and empower marginalised forest-dependent communities. Their project, 'Economic Empowerment of Women through Forest Solutions', exposed the multiple forms of discrimination women face in forest-based enterprises. To advance this work, ForestAction partnered with organisations recognised as 'policy champions' for their strong track record in addressing gender discrimination and shaping supportive legal and regulatory frameworks.

Many of the projects drew on participatory action research and/or feminist methods that emphasise collaborative knowledge production as a means to transform social relations toward greater equity and justice. For WIEGO, a long-time proponent of knowledge coproduction, the practice is both a 'mobilising and political tool' that strengthens the capacity of informal worker organisations to make claims on the state and other stakeholders (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 12).

The Women and Media Collective (WMC), a Sri Lankan nonprofit championing women's rights and gender equality since 1984, foregrounded movement building in their three-country study on 'Women's agency and the gendered impact of violent extremism in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India'. They partnered with local organisations, activists, and community leaders across all three countries and trained young women researchers as part of a broader effort to build networks and foster solidarity.

Similarly, the Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), a research centre working at the intersection of people's movements, health systems, and academia, collaborated with service organisations in India to support individuals affected by sexual and gender-based violence. The service organisations not only facilitated data collection on the differentiated vulnerabilities of young girls and women but also created spaces for 'action-oriented use of the data'. This approach – aligned with feminist and gender-transformative principles (Mullinax, Hart, and Garcia 2018) – made the research process itself a site of transformation by strengthening ground-level activists and organisations to influence policy decisions.

In a related project, 'Reproductive rights in times of conflict' project, a qualitative study of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, highlighted how intersecting social categories and structural factors shape their experiences of GBV. Activist-researchers at the American University of Beirut (AUB) integrated research workshops with the training of Syrian refugee women as community volunteers on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). These trained community members subsequently became 'agents of change within their communities,' organising additional training sessions, workshops and awareness campaigns specifically focused on SRHR and GBV.

The two organisations not yet mentioned – IT for Change, a research and advocacy organisation based in Bangalore, India, with a focus on digital and data policy, and Society for the Study of Women's Health (SSWH), a nonprofit organisation in the Gambia promoting women's health and wellbeing – also view research and action as closely connected. IT for Change's study examined how intersecting differences shape manifestations of online misogyny in India, while SSWH explored how age, ethnicity and education, among other factors, influence women's access to reproductive health services in the Gambia.

These organisations, many of which have been operating for decades, have long recognised that researchers are not neutral actors but are deeply entangled with the power dynamics inherent in the research settings they engage with. This recognition is particularly important when working in local contexts in which power dynamics within research teams, especially those involving marginalised or vulnerable populations, can influence whose voices are heard, whose perspectives are prioritised and whose knowledge is validated. As WIEGO notes, 'co-productive processes seek to establish more horizontal relationships among all actors involved, while recognising the existence of power and dimensions of privilege' (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 12).

Several of the case studies discussed here highlight how they have embraced a feminist praxis – a framework that critically examines and addresses power relations in knowledge production. This approach recognises that research is inherently political and shaped by social structures of power, privilege and inequality. Before setting priorities and directions for research, policy work and activism, these organisations make a deliberate effort to reflect on and address the intersectional power dynamics at play within the research team and broader context.

In practice, this involves striving for non-hierarchical collaboration, ensuring that diverse voices, particularly those from marginalised groups, are given meaningful influence in decision-making. It also requires acknowledging how researchers' own identities, positionalities and histories shape the process and outcomes. Such reflection helps create research environments that are more transparent, equitable and responsive to the needs and experiences of those most affected. These ideals, however, are not straightforward to realise. Persistent local power dynamics, resource constraints and institutional pressures can create tensions that must be navigated carefully. For example, in the WMC case study, the Indonesian research team established a partnership model that allows local research partners to actively shape the research process, ensuring their perspectives and priorities influence methodological choices and interpretations. In the case study, they note:

> To address the chronic imbalance of power between the national/centre and the local, the Indonesian researchers set up a partnership model in which the local research partners were given sufficient space to establish and articulate their distinct interests and positioning on the way the research is conducted at field level. The research project's recognition of the need for foregrounding the local political necessities at the country levels was taken forward by national teams in the local political contexts as well. (Haniffa et al. 2023, 17)

These case studies highlight the importance of ongoing self-reflexivity and critical reflection in addressing power imbalances within research teams and deconstructing hierarchies in researcher-community relationships. As Sweet (2020) argues, reflexivity is less about disclosing one's identity and more about an attentiveness to the exclusion of

non-dominant forms of knowledge, and with grounding analysis in perspectives generated from marginalised or liminal positions.The authors of the ForestAction case study illustrate how researchers' intersecting identities (such as age, caste and ethnicity) were leveraged to create safer spaces for women to share their stories while reflecting on how donor funding also reinforced their outsider status. The research team monitored how their positionality shifted across settings, noting that informal interactions enabled insider relations, whereas formal contexts re-inscribed hierarchical distinctions. By critically examining these fluid movements – from being perceived as 'friends' to 'donors' – they were able to adapt their engagement strategies and decision-making processes to flatten hierarchies.

Similarly, CEHAT-positioned frontline workers not merely as data collectors but also as co-analysts whose contextually grounded insights shaped category selection and produced more nuanced analysis and context-responsive interventions (discussed in detail below). This flattening of hierarchies aligns with feminist, participatory and social justice approaches (Mullinax, Hart, and Garcia 2018), and illustrates how non-hierarchical collaboration can enhance research impact. Adopting such approaches is a complex and sometimes contradictory exercise. It requires careful consideration of whose voices to listen to, how to situate actors' ideas within broader power structures and how researchers' own positionalities shape engagement (see Sweet 2020, 3). It involves a posture of 'epistemological unease' (Sweet 2020, 3) to avoid reproducing categories that reify power. Working with diverse participants and organisations that represent their interests is crucial not only for generating intersectional insights, as discussed in the next section, but also for strengthening the translation of research into social change.

Three principles for deriving intersectional insights

Situate research in context

The case studies underscore the importance of social and historical context. While all social science research generally considers context, an intersectional lens pays particular attention to the power dynamics in distinct spatial and temporal contexts where marginalisation and privilege play out. This lens encourages researchers to view social categories such as race, gender, and caste as contextually contingent rather than fixed. Researchers must understand when and where these differences matter most to identify *who* is most vulnerable to a given issue but also to understand *how* and *why*. This the approach should be applied at every stage of the research, from selecting research locations and methodologies to understanding and making visible intersecting vulnerabilities, and to developing targeted responses and policies to address different forms of oppression in society.

Many of the studies stem from a commitment to participatory action research that emphasises deep knowledge and integration in the local context to interlink research and social change. Participatory action research underscores the importance of the local context in guiding decision-making regarding what to research, who the partner subjects of research ought to be and how to analyse and disseminate the research (Bonu 2022; Wheeler, Shaw, and Howard 2020). This commitment also stresses the value of community proximity in comprehending diverse identities and categories, as elaborated in the subsequent section.

For example, the authors of the case study on the challenges Syrian refugee women face accessing SRHR in Lebanon illustrates how an intersectional lens guided their selection of four diverse regions in Lebanon (Beirut, Bekaa, North Lebanon and South Lebanon) with variations in employment, education, health services, migration history and familiarity with refugee populations, among other things. The study reveals that vulnerabilities to GBV and SRHR service access among Syrian refugees are influenced not only by the intersection of citizenship, ethnicity and gender but also by regional contexts which impact access to health services, economic opportunities, as well as socio-economic status.

Likewise, the study by ForestAction Nepal, which sought to better understand and address the diverse forms of discrimination faced by women in forest-based enterprise development, spans two distinct regions: Sindhupalchok in the mid-hills and Nawalparasi (E) district in the lowlands. This case study highlights how regional differences in agroforestry practices, ecological landscapes and socio-cultural groups intersect with other factors, including women's marital status and land-ownership patterns, to influence women's control over productive assets, participation, and benefit-sharing in Nepal's forestry sector.

The crucial point is that context is pivotal to the selection of the relevant social categories and appropriate methods for obtaining intersectional insights. These choices are not solely determined by the research question, they are also shaped by the researcher's understanding of the broader context in which the research is conducted. The WMC case study on the gendered impact of violent extremism in Sri Lanka Indonesia and India illustrates how investing in a 'reframing workshop' at project inception helped the team develop methodologies grounded in local priorities and contexts:

> In the preparation stage, the local research teams participated in a three-day 'reframing workshop' that was intended to provide information on the research aims and methods as well as to build a shared understanding of key social-political phenomena in the Indonesian context by bringing together experts on a range of relevant topics, such as the history of Islamist extremism in Indonesia, gender and identity politics, young Muslim women's agency in social media, and Indonesian government policy framework on terrorism. Preliminary discussions were also conducted on methodological issues, such as virtual ethnography and writing life stories. (Haniffa et al. 2023, 18)

The authors also share how their project workplan supported the integration of intersectional methods and practices throughout the project cycle. Much like 'gender fade,' in which the integration of a gender lens in research does not consistently carry through all aspects of implementation and analysis, incorporating intersectionality can also falter over the course of the project. For the WMC team, this was mitigated through regular meetings accompanied by mentorship from a team member with theoretical and methodological expertise:

> Throughout the research process, regular online spaces were created for exchanges across the three research sites over three stages of the research: the preparation, implementation, and write-up. […]. These online spaces also became a means of mentoring with active participation and substantive contributions from country lead researcher and a senior feminist academic who engaged in the discussions. (Haniffa et al. 2023, 19)

A persistent challenge in development research is the inadequate understanding and integration of local contexts, which often produces interventions that are poorly

aligned with community needs and lack sustainability. An intersectional lens helps address this by identifying not only who is most vulnerable to a given issue but also how intersecting systems of oppression produce and reproduce that vulnerability. The case studies demonstrate that this demands deep engagement with local power dynamics, careful attention to how economic, social, and political forces shape differentiated outcomes, and a commitment to ensure research and interventions are targeted at those most in need.

Rigour and ethics in choosing identity markers

Identifying the relevant social categories to understand disadvantage or oppression in a specific project or policy environment is a complex and context-dependent undertaking. It is not necessary or practical to consider every conceivable identity category and intersection. Instead, researchers need to pragmatically determine which forms of difference are most prominent or pertinent to the specific inequality or injustice they seek to comprehend and address. The case studies reveal various strategies for deciding on which social categories to focus on.

Where feasible, working closely with communities, grassroots organisations and other actors familiar with the study context can help refine the scope of social categories relevant to the study's research question. Several case studies emphasise how such collaboration creates the conditions in which marginalised communities are centred, enabling researchers to better engage with the salient social categories shaping risk and vulnerability within specific contexts, as well as identify priorities for action and inform policy change. For example, WIEGO's direct engagement with member-based organisations representing informal workers ensures its research and policy agendas address the specific needs and demands of workers.

The authors of the CEHAT case study, in partnership with American Jewish World Service (AJWS), note that partnering closely with SGBV service organisations helped the research team to ground their selection of identity categories in these organisations' contextually embedded insights into the intersecting identities of the women and girls they serve. The authors underscore the pivotal role of frontline workers in choosing specific social categories for analysis, leveraging their 'insider-outsider perspective.' These workers were especially well-positioned to identify links between variables like age, caste, region and relationship to the abuser, highlighting the need for comprehensive data collection across these factors. This recognition transformed data collection into a 'means to enhance their understanding rather than a funder-driven exercise' (Arora, Rege, and Mullinax 2023, 22). The frontline workers played a vital role in ensuring that the collected data not only deepened their understanding of the differentiated vulnerabilities of young girls and women but also informed context-based interventions and policy recommendations.

Other strategies described by case study authors include reviewing existing literature. SSWH notes that a literature review guided their selection of specific identity categories: the review 'revealed gender, education, age and ethnicity as major social determinants of maternal health in The Gambia.' IT for Change describe how they selected identity categories for their Twitter analysis based on insights from their previous work on online gender-based violence in India. They also relied on available literature about intersectional differences that inform the lived experiences of women in digital spaces in

India. Internet Lab's case study highlights the 'complexities in the attribution and self-definition of race and ethnicity' in Brazil when identifying relevant social markers. In their research on online political violence against journalists, the authors explain their choice to include racial-ethnic markers despite limited public data:

> [W]e decided to take responsibility as researchers, especially in the definitions of ethnic-racial belonging, assuming that we might incur mistakes. Making mistakes seemed less severe than foregoing consideration of a marker as important as race in the Brazilian context. (Valente and Martins 2023, 23)

WIEGO also emphasise the importance of contextual sensitivities regarding the categories of race/ethnicity. The authors highlight the integral connection between racial hierarchies and structures of power within capitalist economies (Virdee 2019). In South Africa, where capitalism and racism have long been intertwined and mutually reinforcing, WIEGO emphasise how 'the boundaries of oppression may not be clearly defined.' Consequently, 'workers may find it easier to articulate their struggle based on one or more of their multiple identities (e.g. Black and/or working class) because the intersections are inherently implied' (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 23). The primary challenge, they argue, is to avoid an additive approach that obscures how inequalities intersect in complex, context-specific ways. This tension was evident in the WIEGO Global Study Advisory Team's decision to omit a race/ethnicity question in a survey of nearly 2,000 informal workers (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 23–24). Including such a question would have required extensive, context-sensitive training to ensure that data collection captured the nuanced realities of race and ethnicity across diverse Global South contexts – a step that was not feasible due to the study's time constraints. This example illustrates the trade-offs and practical complexities of implementing intersectional approaches in research: the need to balance methodological rigour, contextual relevance and the ethical imperative to avoid misrepresenting participants' lived experiences.

The literature underscores the importance of prioritising self-identification by communities, where possible, and highlights how global advocacy agendas may influence the adoption of northern identitarian language in settings where such language does not hold contextual relevance (Lynch, Reygan, and Ramphalile 2022). Research on the relevance of LGBTIQ identity categories in African contexts indicates that in many settings, identitarian language such as the LGBTIQ acronym contrasts with local terminologies for sexual diversity (Lynch, Reygan, and Ramphalile 2022). However, donor agendas and global activism often influence local organisations to adopt this language, potentially reinforcing narratives of sexual difference as foreign and 'un-African' (Lynch, Reygan, and Ramphalile 2022). This underscores the crucial need to foreground participants' own descriptions of social difference while situating these categories within the broader social structures and power dynamics that produce and sustain them (Collins and Blige 2020). Intersectionality, therefore, should not be reduced to recognition or representation but must address the underlying inequalities that shape social relations.

Appreciate methodological plurality

Various methodologies are valuable for uncovering interconnected forms of marginalisation at micro (individual), mezzo (community/organisational) and macro (structural)

levels, and for understanding how inequalities are produced and sustained. The choice of methods should be shaped not only by the specific study and contextual considerations but also by its potential to generate meaningful social change and evidence-based policy recommendations. As Rice, Harrison, and Friedman (2019) argue, intersectional research should be driven by a commitment to justice, with method selection reflecting the analytical levels and dimensions most relevant to that aim:

> Intersectional research can take place at multiple analytical levels – micro, mezzo, and macro – but it is neither necessary nor ideal to address in detail every dimension of each level. Nonetheless, it is important to address why some levels and dimensions are the subject of focus, explaining what types of analysis might be facilitated and which might be limited as a result. (Rice, Harrison, and Friedman 2019, 416)

Intersectional research is dominated by qualitative methods that are 'well-suited to studying complex, interrelated issues and capturing nuanced and contextualised experiences' (Lynch et al. 2020, 16). The WMC case study note that their choice of qualitative data collection (life histories) 'was informed by the need to understand women's lives in all their complexity' and 'yielded information that was not limited to how the [researcher selected] identity categories alone impacted women's lives' (Haniffa et al. 2023, 13). The ForestAction Nepal case study outlines the pivotal role of participatory mapping, storytelling and games in facilitating continuous learning and engagement during the research process. Alongside focus group discussions and ethnographic observation, these methods proved critical in unravelling what the authors describe as 'hidden power dynamics' influencing access to forest-based resources.

Considering the ability of qualitative methods to capture complexity, it is unsurprising that qualitative methods dominate intersectionality scholarship. A review of African scholarship applying an intersectional framework finds that most studies rely on qualitative methods and are situated in Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines, with limited methodological variation (Lynch et al. 2020, 15). The scarcity of quantitative studies applying an intersectional lens and the near absence of intersectional research in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields reflect global research trends (Lynch et al. 2020).

Many of the case studies employ mixed methodologies, an approach endorsed as good practice in intersectional gender-transformative research (Lynch et al. 2020, 16). However, it is crucial to acknowledge the risk in suggesting that any specific method or set of methods is universally good or appropriate for intersectional inquiry. In some cases, a single method may indeed be the most effective choice for a particular research inquiry. The CEHAT-AJWS case study, for instance, centres on analysing service data generated by grassroots organisations providing support to survivors of SGBV. This often-overlooked data source offers rich insights into young women's experiences of gender-based violence and reveals how structural barriers and power imbalances in public systems undermine holistic SGBV responses. Collected by frontline workers – typically the first point of contact for survivors – this data not only captures lived experiences, but also highlights how the identity of survivors shapes their access to essential support, offering critical avenues for improving SGBV interventions.

Ultimately, the goal of research informed by intersectionality is to ensure that the methods chosen yield intersectional insights. As such, intersectional quantitative

methods remain underdeveloped yet can yield findings that drive transformative outcomes (see Fehrenbacher and Patel 2020; Rouhani 2014; Scott and Siltanen 2017). While the majority of case studies examined for our article used qualitative approaches, those by WIEGO and SSWH offer insights into common challenges and strategies for overcoming them in quantitative designs. For example, the WIEGO authors note the challenge of obtaining an adequate sample size for differentiated analyses exploring multiple co-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities linked to social identities:

> With smaller city sample sizes, there were moments where it would not have been methodologically appropriate to make inferences regarding differentiated impacts. Relatedly, the smaller city sample sizes did not allow for a more explicit intersectional analysis from both an intrasectoral and intersectoral angle. (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 24)

The authors of the SSWH case study describe their intersectional approach to sampling as designed to support meaningful cross-group comparisons and analyses. To ensure meaningful statistical analysis, the authors 'strategically oversampled rural women and urban men' to enable robust intersectional analysis Recognising the limitations of traditional sampling methods for reaching marginalised populations, they also 'used snowball sampling to recruit marginalised or hidden rural minority ethnic women and adolescent girls that are difficult to access through traditional sampling methods' (Lowe, Ceesay, and Nyaaba 2023, 11).

The scholarly focus on operationalising intersectionality is crucial for enhancing researchers' abilities to integrate its principles into their research. However, an overemphasis on identifying the 'correct' methods for intersectional inquiry runs the risk of favouring some strategies over others and disconnecting the political goals of research and the methods that serve these goals. The caution directed at qualitative researchers to avoid the 'danger of reifying methods in the same way as their colleagues in quantitative research have done for some time' applies equally to intersectionality research (Chamberlain 2000, 286).

Various methodologies are valuable for unravelling interconnected forms of marginalisation at multiple analytical levels (micro, mezzo and macro). While qualitative methods often dominate, they are not necessarily required; the choice depends on the study's context and goals. The case studies frequently employ mixed methodologies, but no single method is universally correct or appropriate method for intersectional inquiry. The primary objective is to choose methods that produce intersectional insights and reveal how intersecting oppressions emerge, develop, and are sustained. However, it is critical that researchers justify their focus on a specific analytical level or dimension and acknowledge what is left unexplored. And lastly, methodological choices are guided not only by analytical rigour but also by their potential to inform actionable social and policy interventions.

Disseminating research for social and policy change

If intersection praxis, as outlined by Townsend-Bell (2009), is motivated to bring about social change it can be applied at various research stages including research dissemination and engagement, policy application and movement building. Townsend-Bell (2009, 1) outlines several strategies for enacting a 'politics of accountability,' which

involves a commitment to eradicate oppressive relations during the research dissemination stage. First, make research results accessible and usable beyond academic publications, reaching diverse language groups, individuals and social groups with varying abilities and educational levels. Second, assess the potential impacts on various actors and organisations, including local governments, communities, associations and schools. Third, ensure that the research benefits participants in their social and political activities, supporting policy development, campaign building, organising, movement building and advocacy.

The WIEGO case study exemplifies the effective dissemination of research results tailored to diverse target audiences to drive policy change. The study discusses various instances in which coproduced outputs were linked to ongoing advocacy effort, including the creation of city fact sheets highlighting the pandemic's impact on specific worker groups and specific policy demands. These fact sheets were utilised in city-specific research launches and served to engage local stakeholders. The study also involved the production of rapid analyses on thematic issues through Policy Insights. Through this approach, WIEGO ensured local partners and workers in informal employment were represented during dissemination activities, such as webinars, in order to provide them with opportunities to present their policy demands directly.

IT for Change utilised the findings from the Twitter study in their ongoing advocacy work, which regularly contributes to legislative and policymaking at both the national and global levels, addressing issues such as countering online gender-based violence, platform accountability and related matters. They note that the findings from the Twitter study allowed them to highlight regulatory 'blind spots' in social media governance that reflect the 'experiences of women situated at the intersection of multiple identities.' For example, social media platforms' content filtering tools that are not caste sensitive often fail to remove caste-based hate speech, particularly those involving regional language and those containing local references/terminologies.

IT for Change's findings on how the 'intersectional location of women in the political field' affects the nature and amount of abuse they receive on Twitter has been used in two major policy submissions: (i) comments on the amendment to India's Intermediary Liability Rules, 2021 and (ii) feedback on UNESCO's Draft Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms. In these submissions, IT for Change urged lawmakers, policymakers and technology companies to 'invest in training local human moderators equipped with the necessary cultural competence to identify forms of trolling and enhance proactive monitoring tools' (Gurumurthy, Rajkumar, and Ashraf 2023, 26).

IT for Change has developed a resource guide to assist judges and lawyers in adjudicating cases of online gender-based violence in a gender-sensitive and rights-based manner. Recognising that lower-level courts often fail to grasp the intersectional nature of violence against women, whether online or offline, the resource guide dedicates a module to intersectionality. This module aims to 'introduce and sensitise judges to the importance of adopting an intersectional lens when considering a survivor's experience' (Gurumurthy, Rajkumar, and Ashraf 2023). By identifying the multiple forces of oppression co-constituting the survivor's experience, judges can apply the appropriate laws and invoke all available remedies. The module draws examples from the Twitter study to illustrate how the experience of online hate differs qualitatively for women based on their multiple and intersecting social locations and identities.

Intersectionality has been considered by some as promoting 'identity politics' to the detriment of coalition building (Rice, Harrison, and Friedman 2019). The case studies, however, offer instances where the research process deepened or created alliances between marginalised or vulnerable groups and others in their community and with academics and policy makers. WIEGO's case study describes how participating in project activities created opportunities for diverse participants and organisations representing their interests to connect to each other and feel less isolated in their experiences, thereby strengthening social movements and advocacy efforts among workers in informal employment at both local and global levels.

In Accra, Ghana, where WIEGO, through their Focal Cities team, has a well-established history of working with local actors, the research served as a critical 'tool for workers' alliance-building, particularly with the trade union movement, academics and policymakers.' However, WIEGO also note how an intersectional perspective that draws attention to how 'differentiated experiences of inequalities' can also present tensions in organising efforts to build solidarity. They note that 'forging consensus as to how to address these organising challenges is essential to avoid weakening or fracturing organisations,' stressing that raising awareness of differentiated experiences is key to strengthening organisations' internal democratic capacities (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 28). These insights suggest that acknowledging intersectional differences is not an obstacle to organising, but also a precondition for more democratic, representative and strategically effective coalitions. In this way, attending to internal inequalities, rather than avoiding them, can strengthen social movements.

Conclusion

Operationalising intersectionality in development research and policy offers both opportunities and challenges because it functions more as a lens than a rigid framework. Given the limited documentation of Global South experiences in integrating intersectionality into research design and policy praxis, this article fills an important gap in the literature. We have identified three key principles for generating intersectional insights: contextual application, rigour and ethics in selecting social categories and adaptability across diverse methodologies. The case studies highlight overlaps between intersectionality and other activist traditions that emphasise local context, knowledge coproduction and research for social change. These overlaps and tensions require further examination to ensure intersectionality is neither imposed at the expense of other approaches nor applied in a tokenistic or additive manner, as Hunting and Hankivsky (2020) caution with gender mainstreaming.

As intersectionality gains mainstream traction, concerns have emerged about its non-contextual application and the erosion of its radical and transformative potential. The WIEGO case study describes this as 'neoliberalism's capacity to co-opt emancipatory discourse' (Ogando, Mhlana, and Rogan 2023, 28). Critics also note that intersectionality is too often reduced to recognising and representing identities rather than confronting unequal power relations (Menon 2015; Salem 2018). Such approaches risk diluting the political and activist origins of the concept.

Our analysis underscores that operationalising intersectionality requires sustained and explicit attention to power – within research teams, across community partnerships and

in funding structures. The case studies show that the research process itself is central to producing intersectional insights and transformative action. Building equitable partnerships with local communities and activist groups relies on intentional practices that are adhered to throughout the project, such as joint project planning, locally sensitive capacity building and regular data validation workshops and knowledge sharing activities. These require sufficient time, funding and organisational support, and underscore that intersectionality cannot be meaningfully operationalised without corresponding investments.

Given intersectionality centres structural inequalities and power imbalances, it is critical that discussions about its use translates into critical examinations of power within grant-making. Recent cuts to global aid have exposed long-standing inequities in the development model, with reduced funding expected to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable groups in society. These pressures have reignited debates about dependency and the colonial legacies of the current development sector, with many pointing out that development has had unequal benefits within and between countries around the world.

As development research funding predominantly flows from the Global North to the South, incorporating intersectionality principles into grant-making encourages donors to confront power imbalances and rethink prevailing development models (Lynch, Fluks, and Essop 2022; Ryono 2018). First, by recognising the historical and intersecting structures of power and vulnerability, intersectionality clarifies the nature of social problems and grounds solutions in specific political, economic and social contexts. Second, it identifies where power must shift to redress inequities. Finally, by centring local knowledge and coproduction, it supports the formation of coalitions and partnerships better equipped to tackle complex development challenges.

The case studies also illustrate the substantial time and financial commitments required to avoid tokenistic or extractive approaches. The CEHAT–AJWS example shows that an intersectional feminist praxis – particularly one grounded in non-extractive collaboration with grassroots organisations – depends on donors who share and resource these commitments. Flexible and long-term funding is therefore essential for cultivating the institutional cultures needed to embed intersectional practice. We argue that multi-year investments that strengthen organisational capacities are critical for enabling development actors to undertake sustained intersectional work. Equally important is that funding for country-level dialogues and for generating evidence be grounded in locally defined priorities rather than donor-driven agendas. Early-stage research support is particularly vital for developing holistic understandings of social issues, identifying the most vulnerable groups and shaping contextually rooted policy responses. Finally, stable and secure funding is necessary for organisational sustainability. By reducing dependency and enabling organisations to withstand shocks – such as those triggered by the recent aid crisis – funders can create the conditions under which intersectional practices at the organisational level can genuinely challenge, rather than reproduce, entrenched inequalities in the global development system.

The arrival and adaption of intersectionality in diverse Global South contexts highlights how local histories, struggles and activist imaginaries shape its application, while exposing hierarchies and exclusions in knowledge production. As Srila Roy (2023, 248) argues, we should move 'from predictable stories of origin and travel – from the

northern epicentre to the global periphery – to complex mappings of arrival onto southern shores,' focusing on the work the concept does (or fails to do) and helping to guard against its depoliticisation.

Despite growing calls for intersectional research, significant gaps remain between understanding complex power dynamics and taking meaningful action to dismantle oppression in all its forms – gaps that are further exacerbated by limited capacity and shrinking resources. Yet, as this article has shown, intersectionality remains a powerful lens for revealing overlapping vulnerabilities, exposing structural inequalities and making visible the entrenched power hierarchies that shape development practice. Its potential to reorient development models and policymaking toward more equitable and sustainable pathways depends on ensuring that the concept does not become a depoliticised buzzword or a tool that alienates social mobilisation. With intersectionality still nascent in development research and policy – and too often shaped by Global North perspectives – centring Southern voices and locally grounded analyses is essential. Doing so not only deepens the concept's political force but also enables more reflexive, context-responsive applications. Ultimately, prioritising Southern perspectives is crucial for sustaining intersectionality's transformative potential and ensuring it operates as a meaningful tool for social justice.

Box 1. Case study reports.

Case study Report 1: WIEGO
Ogando, A.C., Mhlana, S. and Rogan, M. 2023. Interrogating intersectionality: considerations on critical inquiry and praxis for WIEGO's actionable research. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 1, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 2: American University of Beirut
El-Fakahany, S., Whaibeh, E. Habib, L.A. and El-Kak, F. 2023. Navigating intersectional realities: On Syrian refugee women's sexual and reproductive health and rights in Lebanon. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 2, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 3: Women and Media Collective
Haniffa, F., Samuel, K., Chandrakirana, K., Emmanuel, S. and Arasu, P. 2023. Undoing "violent extremism": a three country collaborative research study by the Women and Media collective foregrounding the need for a more complex analysis of women's experiences of political violence. Intersectionality Case Study Number 3, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 4: Internet Lab
Valente, M. and Martins, F.K. 2023. Outcomes and challenges in adopting intersectionality as a method at InternetLab: Considerations for research and practice. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 4, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 5: Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT) and American Jewish World Service (AJWS)
Arora, S., Rege, S. and Mullinax, M. 2023. Using an intersectional lens to build stronger evidence and action at the grassroots level in India to build a comprehensive response to sexual and gender-based violence. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 5, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 6: ForestAction Nepal
Baral, S. and Lama, K. 2023. Intersectional research for women's economic empowerment through Forest Solutions in Nepal. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 6, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 7: Society for the Study of Women's Health (SSWH)
Lowe, M., Ceesay, F.K. and Nyaaba, P. 2023. Applying an intersectional lens to understanding the social determinants of maternal health in The Gambia: Insights from the SIMAH Project. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 7, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Case Study Report 8: IT for Change
Gurumurthy, A., Rajkumar, M. and Muhammed Ashraf, M. 2023. Intersectional frames in digitalisation research: revisiting a study by IT for Change about misogynistic trolling online. Intersectionality Case Study Report Number 8, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, University of the Witwatersrand.

Notes

1. The *structural domain* refers to power embedded in social institutions such as the labour market, education, and healthcare. The *cultural domain* involves dominant societal perceptions and norms that shape understandings of social issues. The *disciplinary domain* relates to how rules and regulations are enforced, determining inclusion or marginalisation within social structures. Finally, the *interpersonal domain* captures how everyday experiences of power shape individuals' intersecting identities and their vulnerability to multiple forms of oppression.
2. (1) *Research Framing*: Assesses whether the research problem recognises social categories—such as gender or race—as heterogeneous and intersecting, and whether it situates these within broader systems and structures of power. (2) *Methodological Choices*: Considers the research design, methods, and data analysis, including attention to systems of oppression and/or privilege, micro- and macro-levels of analysis, the selection of social categories, and the use of an intersectional framework in interpreting findings. (3) *Dissemination and Application*: Evaluates how knowledge is made accessible and relevant to diverse groups, centres the perspectives of those most affected, and supports advocacy that moves beyond single-axis approaches.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on the eight case study reports that resulted from the collaborative research initiative 'Promoting Intersectional Development Research', led by the University of the Witwatersrand's Southern Centre for Inequality Studies (SCIS), and funded and supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) – grant number 109965–001. The authors would like to thank the case study authors without whom this paper would not exist. Special thanks to Shireen Hassim, Seipati Mokhema, Arjan de Haan, Chaitali Sinha and David Francis whose feedback and engagement helped shape this paper. Opinions stated in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDRC or SCIS.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research was funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) – grant number 109965-001.

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