P242 / Moving Beyond Barriers: Operationalizing Intersectionality Across Policy Processes

Topic : Equity, Gender, Inclusion and the Diversity in Public Policy

Chair : Gemma Hunting (Simon Fraser University)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Intersectionality is increasingly referenced in policy spaces, but this uptake is often surface-level. It is often brought in late as an add-on, reduced to identity categories that overlook intersecting structures of power, and cut off from its roots in Black feminist thought and social justice activism. This is compounded by intensifying backlash against equity-focused initiatives globally.

Demand for guidance has grown alongside this uptake. Governments, international organizations, researchers and community organizations have produced a growing body of frameworks, toolkits and guides, such as Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Plus, the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis Framework (Hankivsky et al. 2012, 2nd edition forthcoming), and UN Women/UNPRPD Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit (2021). Many policy actors also draw on related approaches attentive to power, including antiracist and decolonizing frameworks. The barriers to using such approaches are well documented, in the intersectionality literature and in decades of gender mainstreaming research showing how equity commitments get absorbed into routine procedure and lose their political edge. Far less is known about what people actually do to move past those barriers, what works in which settings, and at what cost to those doing the work. The chairs' nearly completed 4.5-year program of research, including a critical scoping review of frameworks, as well as interviews, workshops and surveys with international researchers, community actors and policy actors, points to promising, context-specific strategies and examples of successful operationalization that are rarely detailed in the literature.

This panel shifts the focus from diagnosis to strategy. It asks what critical operationalization of intersectionality requires and looks like across policy processes, and what researchers, policy actors, decision-makers and community actors are doing to make it happen. Building on critical policy studies, the panel treats policy as a relational and contested process rather than a technical instrument, and covers the full cycle from research generation and use to analysis, design, budgeting, implementation and evaluation.

The panel explores four hypotheses. First, intersectional policy work is more likely to change inequity when it addresses intersecting structures of power and not only identity categories, and when it shapes problem definition from the start rather than being added late. Second, epistemic hierarchies determine whose knowledge counts in policy processes, including within intersectionality work itself, so strategies that shift those hierarchies are central to operationalization and not a side issue. Third, reflexivity about positionality and institutional location is a condition of critical practice. Fourth, actors working under backlash or limited support develop strategies such as reframing, coalition building and working from the margins of institutions, and these carry trade-offs between keeping the work alive and watering it down that need closer study.

By bringing together empirical, methodological and conceptual work across jurisdictions and sectors, the panel aims to build a shared and practical account of what intersectional policy work looks like when it moves beyond naming barriers, and to connect this to wider debates on policy design, knowledge use and implementation, with the aim of more equitable and effective policy.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel welcomes papers from researchers, policy actors, decision-makers, and community and NGO actors working with intersectionality and related approaches attentive to power, including antiracist and decolonizing frameworks. We are interested in work that goes beyond identifying barriers to show what people are doing about them.

Relevant papers could include empirical cases of efforts to operationalize intersectionality in a specific policy process, including partial successes and failures and what was learned from them. Methodological contributions on applying intersectionality in research methods, budgeting, indicators, knowledge exchange

or evaluation are also welcome, as are critical analyses of existing frameworks, toolkits and guidance and how they get used in practice. We also invite papers on strategies for sustaining equity work under political backlash or limited institutional support, on how community and excluded knowledges shape policy, and comparative work across jurisdictions, sectors or levels of government. Like many equity frameworks, Gender-Based Analysis Plus (or intersectional gender mainstreaming) have been widely critiqued for treating intersectionality as an add-on to sex and gender and for being reduced to checklist compliance. We welcome papers on what has helped push these and other equity frameworks past those limits in practice. We are also interested in how intersectionality moves between activist, research and government settings, and perspectives on how these moves effect transformation. Papers may draw on any method, including case studies, interviews, document analysis, participatory and community-based research, and practice-based reflection. We particularly encourage contributions from the Global South and from community-based and activist settings, as well as work co-presented with community partners.

Proposals should be explicit about how they understand intersectionality, including its roots in Black feminist thought and social justice activism, and how their work attends to intersecting structures of power rather than identity categories alone. Proposals should also briefly reflect on the authors' or team's positionality and how it shapes the work. Authors are encouraged to say how their work engages the people most affected by the policies they study. Papers that use intersectionality only to describe inequities, or that list barriers without examining responses to them, are less suited to this panel. Where possible, we will put researchers, policy actors and community actors in conversation with each other across the panel.