

## The intersectional challenges faced by women of colour in South Africa

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Gender oppression speaks to the challenges that women face due to their gender. South African societies have become characterised by the oppression of women by men as women continue to exist on the periphery in our community. This society has normalised the treatment of women as inferior to men. Further, it considers men robust and women powerless, a problematic status with a long history in South Africa. In this patriarchal society, the liberation struggle focused on ensuring that black people receive equal treatment as white people, ignoring that men do not treat women as their equals.

Black women, in particular, still find themselves facing multiple challenges in society. Amongst others, this is the struggle against racialised, colonial and capitalist heterosexual gender oppression. Especially men in the echoes of power both in corporate and in government institutions such as the judiciary, which is male-dominated, overlook gender oppression. One prevalent example is the constitution of our Constitutional Court bench. Only one-third of the justices are women. The author argues that women still face intersecting patriarchy, racism, economic exploitation, and other related forms of heterosexual gender oppression.

Intersectionality refers to the overlapping of social attributes such as gender, race, class, ability, religion, and sexual orientation (Veenstra 2001). This concept of intersectionality is crucial in understanding how systemic injustices and social inequalities occur on multifaceted levels (Segalo 2015). After the advent of democracy in South Africa, everyone was considered equal, at least according to the narrow definition of formal equality. Formal equality refers to the idea that all people should be treated equally regardless of their actual circumstances (Phooko & Radebe 2016). However, to argue that all citizens are equal would delegitimise women's struggle for equality and access to resources and is known as

the substantive conception of equality. It aims to address structural social and economic inequalities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.

Our societies have failed women. The struggle that women face includes but is not limited to the battle against gender-based violence (GBV), gatekeeping of a particular type in different corporations, racial discrimination, and others. Women are still denied an opportunity to make their mark in the corporate and political spaces, affecting their ability to attain financial security and access resources. These two factors are arguably intricately linked to human dignity. Those who get jobs in the corporate world still find themselves exploited and paid less than their male colleagues in similar positions. According to the study conducted by the National Business Initiative (2021), evidence suggests that women are experiencing higher levels of unemployment, while those who are employed are paid 19 to 37 per cent less than men.

In an attempt to incorporate women into the mainstream economy, government and corporations have adopted an 'add women and stir approach' strategy to incorporate them into the patriarchal system rather than destroying the systems and structures of patriarchy. Nkenkana (2015: 43) lucidly captured this when he questioned gender transformation based on numerical representation without looking at patriarchy's entire system and structural change. In doing that, Nkenkana (2015: 44) argues that even though Africa's organs of state and governance have jointly deployed various efforts towards women's emancipation, measures such as numbers of women in parliaments and high positions of states and government have not translated to the genuine liberation of women. As a remedy, the AU developed a gender policy and other instruments focused on addressing gender inequalities and adopted a new resolution in 2011 to increase women's political participation and leadership (Nkenkana 2015: 44). These measures would create a fair society that would protect and uphold the interests of men and women.

In South Africa, gender inequality dates back to apartheid South Africa where women were not considered full citizens. First, only white men, and subsequently, also white women were full citizens. Although black men and women suffered under apartheid, the struggle they faced was somehow different. One practical example is how black women could not purchase properties in their names. Women are supposed to be full citizens in the post-apartheid era. That status is a mere deceptive outward appearance of what a full citizen is. However, women still have limited powers and are excluded from decision-making within their societies. For example, traditionally, the King and his council that consists only of men, take decisions, making it evident that women still find themselves confronted with the evil they faced in the past.

The post-apartheid state has failed to address the past injustices created by the apartheid government, and those injustices have somehow crept into post-apartheid society. The current social and economic concerns that women face are directly and indirectly attributed to historical systems of exclusion and discrimination against them. Women experience discrimination, although they are in a better position to understand societal issues than men. Phooko and Radebe (2016: 136) argue that women are more likely to understand issues affecting women and children, especially in a society where women constitute 51.3 per cent and historically and presently, women are disproportionately saddled with raising and caring for children.

Women also perform unpaid domestic duties at home. Becker (1999: 21) argues that most men are aware of women's second shift and its unfairness but are uninterested in change because we glorify hyper-masculinity and overlook and denigrate domestic duties that women perform. Many women continue to carry the multiple burdens of taking care of the household while working full time, thus making it difficult for them to integrate into the public sphere (Segalo 2015:73 ).

Society is organised around attributes that value men's work as opposed to the unpaid domestic labour performed by women, which has created and perpetuates inequalities amongst sexes. Social structures and individuals create and reproduce inequalities linked to sex, race, religion, ethnicity and other differences (Beker 1999: 24). Consequently, the problems that particularly women of colour face include confronting a system and a social structure that is male-centred, male-identified, and male-dominated. It is a social structure where black women are on the periphery while white men are in the centre, followed by white women and black men.

Considering the above, it becomes clear that understanding the current patriarchal system becomes vital to devising relevant strategies to address women's subjugation. It will then be possible to develop a line of action that will objectively stretch beyond the use of men and their roles in society as a benchmark to measure the capabilities of women. The challenge of the current transformation strategies is that the extent to which a woman 'performs a man's job' indicates whether or not women are capable and deserving. In the workplace, men usually hold leadership positions even though women are capable of performing leadership roles. Even though women have access, the workplace is still structured to favour men.

The organising of society by race and gender oppresses black women and reinforces racial oppression and sexism in patriarchal structures. To create an equal community, we have to eliminate systems and networks that put women in a 'crooked room' where injustices such as gender inequality persist in crippling and rendering them invisible. The room remains 'crooked' because most women occupy lower positions within the workplace while men mainly occupy senior and decision-making positions (Segalo 2015: 73).

The issues that women face are multifaceted. From a class perspective, an unequal remunerative structure exploits women in the workplace, and others are denied access to political and corporate spaces. The dynamics of power structures in these spaces across the globe seek to maintain the status quo by hampering gender transformation initiatives. From a race perspective, gender is intimately tied to race and racialisation. Black women face social issues that are different to those faced by white women. White women tend to socially reproduce class, and the racial status of white men looking down on black women reinforcing the belief that white women are superior to black women.

To understand the challenges that black women face, one cannot look at gender oppression from one perspective. Gender oppression needs a broader and nuanced understanding of intersecting multiple dimensions of race, class, and gender hierarchies. This understanding is crucial if we are serious about re-imaging gender rather than applying a blanket approach to issues different women across the globe face. The concept of intersectionality seeks to refute the false notion that all women face the same socio-economic problems and further provides an understanding of the interconnected nature of the overall struggle against patriarchy. To create a society that values men and women equally requires us to eradicate the deep-rooted structures of domination that are in place and seek to perpetuate any patriarchal ideologies.



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