

# “Diversity Within”: The Problems with “Intersectional” White Feminism in Practice

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In intersectionality studies, debates about the additive versus constitutive nature of intersectionality are long-established. This article attempts to intervene in these conversations by examining how additive, “diversity within” intersectionality works in practice. Across feminist academia, advocacy, and policymaking, there is a widely held perception that among the nongovernmental organizations constituted around identity-based inequalities (feminist, racial justice, migrants, disability, and LGBTQI+ rights), it is the feminist sector that best advocates for and attempts to practice intersectionality. This is related to the appropriation of Black feminist theories of intersectionality which emerged from grassroots activism and Critical Race scholarship as “feminist” theory, wherein feminist is always-already constructed as white. Drawing on empirical research with equality organizations working with disabled women and trans women in England and Scotland, this article suggests that the opposite is true: the additive intersectionality practiced by the white-led feminist sector serves to uphold white supremacy and other structural inequalities.

## Introduction

Intersectionality is the term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw for Black women’s theorizing of the social world’s foundational organizing logics of white supremacy—a global, social, political, economic, and cultural system which privileges whiteness, gendered racism, and racialized sexism (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Although most often associated with Black American feminist theory, intersectionality has a long tradition in Black British feminism (Amos et al. 1984; Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe 2018; Mirza 1997) and Afropean feminism (Emejulu and Sobande 2019; Florvil 2020; Optiz, Oguntoye, and Schultz 1991; Wekker 2016). Intersectionality is the

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understanding that social inequalities are interdependent and indivisible from one another: “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (Collins 2015, 2).

Crenshaw employs intersectionality to describe the ways that Black women’s experiences and identities are marginalized by practices that treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories not only in anti-discrimination law but also in feminist and anti-racist movements. As the classic essay collection edited by Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith (2015 [1980]) succinctly put it, “All the women are white, all the Blacks are men—but some of us are brave.” When race and gender are conceptualized as separate and independent from each other there is a tendency for the most powerful members of marginalized groups, in this case, white women and Black men—to universalize themselves and their particular experiences and position themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the group as a whole.

There is a long-running debate among intersectionality scholars on what precisely intersectionality *is* (Hancock 2007, 2013; Jordan-Zachery 2007; Lutz 2015; May 2015; Collins 2019), as well as what it *means*. If intersectionality is disputed by academics, then what does it mean to those seeking to practice intersectionality in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)? How do definitions among practitioners relate to academic debates? How does what intersectionality is understood to mean relate to how it is applied? Our article examines how additive, what we call “diversity within,” intersectionality works in practice. Although rather unwieldy, we use “diversity within” to foreground how some practitioners in our study described the ways that they applied intersectionality. For these practitioners, addressing “diversity,” a term ubiquitously and often uncritically mobilized in the UK policy context (see Ahmed 2012), means acknowledging differences (e.g. of ethnicity, disability) within a predefined social group (i.e. women), and seeking to include those who have been excluded from their organization’s activities and services.

In feminist academia, advocacy, and policymaking, there is often an assumption that among the single-issue NGO sectors organized around identity-based inequalities (disability rights, feminist, LGBTQI+ rights, racial justice, migrants’ rights), it is the feminist sector that is the pathfinder that best advocates for and innovates in its practice of intersectionality (e.g. Evans 2015, 2016; see also Bassel and Emejulu 2017a, 2017b). Below we provide examples of this assumption being made by senior equality policymakers as well as women’s sector practitioners and directors in both England and Scotland. We argue that this erroneous assumption is the result of the appropriation of Black feminist theories of intersectionality emerging from Critical Race scholarship as “feminist” theory, wherein feminist is always-already constructed as white (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Emejulu 2022; Lewis 2013; Tomlinson 2013). A majority of research on intersectionality and social movements which centers a particular identity-based sector focuses on white-

dominated feminist organizations and movements (e.g. Boucher 2018; English 2019, 2020; Evans 2015, 2016; Laperriere and Lépinard 2016; Lépinard 2014; with exceptions including Tungohan 2015; Terriquez et al. 2018). This focus reflects intersectionality’s powerful academic appropriation as white “feminist” theory (Davis 2008), particularly in Europe where race is disavowed and intersectionality is often mobilized to strategically erase race, racism, and white supremacy (Emejulu and van der Scheer 2021; Lewis 2013). Feminist NGO advocates consider themselves to be the intersectionality experts—and thus legitimate “representatives” of women experiencing intersecting inequalities—a view echoed among gender equality policymakers, as will be evidenced through our empirical data below. Meanwhile among policymakers internationally, when it has been mobilized, intersectionality has been appropriated by “gender mainstreaming” technocrats (see e.g. Christoffersen 2022a on European policy; Hunting and Hankivsky 2020 for a critique; Lombardo and Agustín 2016), who engage exclusively with white-dominated feminist NGOs. Based on our research with equality organizations in England and Scotland, this article offers a counter-narrative. Instead, we argue that though the feminist NGO sector claims to be the only one really doing intersectionality, the particular way that intersectionality is being practiced by the single-issue white-led feminist sector serves, far from furthering intersectional justice, to uphold white supremacy and other structural inequalities. This is demonstrated through empirical examples concerning projects targeted toward disabled women, and perceptions and conflicts regarding trans rights.<sup>1</sup> We share these examples because issues of disability and trans rights formed the foci of discussions of intersectionality in the women’s sector—to the exclusion of discussion of racism.

We begin this article by first reviewing some of the key debates within intersectionality studies, particularly in relation to additive and constitutive approaches. We first discuss the additive ways that these practitioners understand how to apply intersectionality, an approach that reinforces white supremacy and other structural inequalities. We then provide examples of how additive approaches work in practice through discussion of organizing around disability and trans rights. Ultimately, diversity within intersectionality is “non-performative” (Ahmed 2006; Nash 2019); in other words, it is an empty gesture that reaffirms white supremacy within these organizations. While much attention has been given to how single-issue women’s organizations can become more representative of marginalized women experiencing intersecting inequalities (e.g. Strolovitch 2007), we suggest alternative paths forward.

## The Battle Over Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a contested term (Collins and Bilge 2016; Hancock 2016; May 2015), and authors have suggested conceiving it as a field of study

rather than as simply a theory (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Hancock 2016). Yet core to its meaning is that systems of inequality, including capitalism/class, sexism, racism and white supremacy, heterosexism, cisgenderism, ableism, and borders, constitute one another, meaning that they construct one another and interact to create institutions and differential social positions (Bassel and Emejulu 2010; Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; May 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006). Social institutions and positions are therefore shaped by multiple, mutually constituting, divisions operating simultaneously. Applying intersectionality, in both theory and practice, therefore means engagement with the interrelationship of these systems of inequality. This engagement is in turn predicated on acknowledgment of and reckoning with the ontology of each of these structures themselves.

As we and others argue, social divisions and identities cannot be separated from one another because they are mutually constituting, so that, for example, there is little analytical value in discussing “women” generically, but only particular categories of women, wherein gender is constituted by other elements, resulting in a specific inhabiting and experience of gender which is qualitatively different to others (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Yet intersectionality emerges from a feminist context where “woman” is always-already constructed as white (Davis 1983; Lewis 2017), one where the figure of the Black woman has been discursively and materially degendered through slavery and its afterlife, and in its wake (Hartman 2008; Sharpe 2016; Spillers 1987). Although not named as such, intersectionality has been a constitutive element of Black women’s politics since the colonial encounter. Understanding how race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and legal status interact in ways that advantage some groups and disadvantage others has formed the basis of Black women’s politics for centuries (Collins 1990; Emejulu 2022).

While we see a constitutive definition of intersectionality as integral to it, others advocate additive definitions: a strand of white feminist academic thought employs particular definitions of intersectionality suggesting that inequalities can be separated from one another. This is exemplified by Walby, Armstrong, and Strid (2012a, 2012b), who seek to arbitrate a new legitimate meaning of intersectionality. As social scientists historically mainly concerned with gender and class, they argue for a conception of the relationship between inequalities as “mutually shaping” rather than mutually constitutive: “which suggests that while the effects of one inequality on other inequalities may be discerned, the separate systems of inequality remain” (Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012a, 453), because “the recognition of the differences between the ontologies of inequalities is necessary in order to [analyze] . . . practices that have been important in developing appropriate measures to tackle inequalities” (Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012a, 474). A “mutual shaping” approach would seem to justify a continued focus on gender alone, without meaningful engagement with the ontologies of other inequality structures, nor how gender both constructs and is always constructed by them. For Walby

et al., mutual shaping “acknowledges the way that systems of social relations change each other at the point of intersection, but do not become something totally different” (Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012b, 235). This contradicts what many Black feminists have argued are systems of social relations that together produce social institutions and positions that *are* qualitatively different from those produced by one system of social relations alone (Crenshaw 1991). The “mutual shaping” model offered represents an additive approach to intersectionality, in that it suggests that inequalities can be separated from one another; the idea that they change one another only at the “point of intersection” (Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012b, 235) suggests the existence of a point at which there is no intersection. While few authors are explicit in their employment of a “mutually shaping” rather than “mutually constitutive” approach, it is apparent in many white feminist treatments of intersectionality which discuss it as “gender plus” and only in relation to gender, women, women’s studies, and feminism (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Lewis 2017).

Other scholars have not seen recognition of differing ontologies and a conceptualization of inequalities as mutually constitutive as being contradictory from one another: “although discourses of race, gender, class, etc. have their own ontological bases which cannot be reduced to each other, *there is no separate concrete meaning of any facet of these social categories, as they are mutually constitutive in any concrete historical moment*” (Yuval-Davis 2013, 7; emphasis added). “Mutual shaping” forgoes what is considered a key tenet of intersectionality by many of its theorists, i.e. mutual constitution/construction (e.g. Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 1990).

As white feminist engagement with intersectionality increases, the body of literature that is critical of the way that white feminists apply intersectionality in both theory and practice is correspondingly growing (e.g. Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Lewis 2013; May 2015; Tomlinson 2013). Within feminist studies, Bilge (2013) argues that “intersectionality . . . has been systematically depoliticized” (p. 405): “originally focused on transformative and counter-hegemonic knowledge production and radical politics of social justice, [it] has been commodified and colonized for neoliberal regimes” (p. 407). A tendency has been observed, and named, among some European thinkers “to find valuable a ‘purified’ intersectionality, quarantined from its exposure to race” (Lewis 2013; Tomlinson 2013, 266), a process Bilge calls “whitening” and observes within feminist studies and elsewhere (Bilge 2013). Indeed, the focus on race within intersectionality studies has been found to be less prevalent in Europe than in the United States (Mugge et al. 2018). It is important to carefully examine how intersectionality travels in a European context similarly characterized by anti-Blackness, and which disavows and displaces race (Bassel and Emejulu 2017a; Christoffersen 2022b; Emejulu and van der Scheer 2021; Lewis 2013). Moreover, Black feminists theorize the ways in which Black women, “as both representation and embodied, sentient being[s]”

(Lewis 2017, 117) are effaced, discursively and materially made absent. We therefore note the potential for invocations of intersectionality in practice—as well as in academia—to be a site of this epistemological and material erasure of Black women, as knowledge producers and actors in these social worlds (Lewis 2017).

Additive approaches to intersectionality rely on essentialist ideas about what the social structure of gender is and does by ultimately refusing the idea that it exists only within always-interlocking structures of inequality. In so doing, both scholars and practitioners reconstruct gender, like the category “woman,” as always-already white, and as we will demonstrate, nondisabled and cis.

We now move onto contextualize the article within long-running grassroots contestations of white feminist conceptions of gender and womanhood from Black women and women experiencing intersecting inequalities.

## Constitutive Controversies

We are in the middle of a tumultuous period in which key categories of identification and enactments of power relations through gender are being contested and reconfigured. The bitter debate about what womanhood is, how it is constituted and performed has upended Scottish and English feminisms. To be sure, these debates are in no way new, but debates about the status of trans women in ostensibly “female only” spaces, about race and white supremacy in light of resurgent anti-racist mobilizations, and about colonial memory and decolonization processes have brought to the fore long-standing tensions within feminist politics in the United Kingdom (Bey 2017; Bhambra 2014; Emejulu 2022). Transness, race, and decoloniality, for instance, force us to historicize that which has been taken for granted—gender and the gender binary—and fundamentally challenge what the conceptual basis of being a “woman” and doing “womanhood” means. This is why Black feminist theorists are so careful in framing intersectionality as mutually constitutive because once you understand that embedded in the idea of “woman” are the normative values of white, bourgeois cisheteronormativity, then the entire fiction of “woman” is exposed (Emejulu 2022; Hartman 2008; Sharpe 2016; Spillers 1987).

Black, Asian, lesbian, queer, and disabled women have long critiqued the excluding and exclusive category of “womanhood” as practiced by mainstream feminism, or what is now more recently termed “white feminism.” Under this framework, gender is the foundation of social inequality and the only category of inequality that can unite all women in a struggle against it. It is presumed that the subject in mainstream feminism is a straight, white, middle-class, and nondisabled woman, and that this particular subject and her experiences can be universalized as the standard bearer for all women

across time and space. As such, feminist political strategies are pursued on this basis of “exclusive universalism” (Bassel and Emejulu 2017a)—from abortion rights to anti-violence against women’s work to the gender pay gap. Because these struggles have, for the most part, excluded different kinds of women and their experiences of inequality at other intersections of race, class, sexuality, disability, and legal status, English and Scottish feminisms have been fractured over these constitutive politics.

For example, the struggle for abortion rights in the 1970s and 1980s had to be expanded by the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), the Brixton Black Women’s Group, and other radical Black and Asian activists to include a wider conception of bodily autonomy, encompassing resistance against virginity tests and forced sterilization of women of color in Britain and across the former British colonies (Brixton Black Women’s Group 1984; Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe 2018). Women’s bodily autonomy was not only about the fate of individual women’s bodies in terms of accessing contraception and abortion services but about how collectives of racialized bodies are captured and controlled by the bordering practices of the British state. OWAAD and other radical women of color demonstrated how sexism could not be separated from racism and the colonial relations of the British state. Imbricated in this struggle to expand the boundaries of who is included in womanhood is the longstanding lesbian and queer critique of mainstream feminism and the heteronormative assumptions embedded in much of feminist politics—particularly in relation to the sexual division of labor (Butler 1999; Federici 2004). Lesbian, queer, and trans women expanded feminist struggles beyond the gender binary and seeking rights beyond simple equality with (white) men. Lesbian, queer, and trans feminisms expand the terrain of feminist politics by insisting on survival, visibility, desire, and transgression as foundational feminist concerns which can only be addressed when the power relations mobilized through sexuality, gender, class, and race are taken seriously (Cohen 1997; Phelan 1997). Indeed, perhaps what is most puzzling about the current trans debate is how it echoes similar bad faith concerns about the “lavender menace” and the fear of lesbian women infiltrating “straight” women’s feminist spaces in the 1960s and 1970s (Brownmiller 2000).

Disabled women challenge ideas of womanhood by politicizing impairment and illness. Rather than framing disabled bodies as broken and in need of fixing, or worse, elimination, disability feminism makes visible our disabling physical and social environments and institutions which render disabled people deviant and abnormal. Through a social model of disability and crip theory, disabled feminists challenge the stigma and invisibility of impairments, by considering how particular bodies are framed as pathological and thus consigned to disposability. Thinking about how gender, race, sexuality, and disability intersect is a direct challenge to dominant feminist approaches to bodily autonomy and caring practices in public and private spaces.

Disability feminism forces us to consider how different kinds of women's bodies operate in space and generate different kinds of politics and strategies for liberation (Inckle 2014; McRuer 2006).

Thus, the current uproar about the presence of trans women in feminist spaces, for instance, is part of a long tradition within English and Scottish feminisms of forcing open feminist politics and spaces to not only make them more inclusive but to implode dominant approaches to feminism and womanhood, and build a new kind of intersectional politics capable of understanding and taking action on complex inequalities derived from race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and legal status. While what is a woman is always contested, contemporary debates about trans rights, sex work, decolonization, and anti-racism, and disability rights bring this particular and latent violence in the mainstream movement to the forefront.

We will now turn to discuss our methodology and methods.

## Methodology

The empirical data in this article draw on Christoffersen's Ph.D. project exploring how equality NGO practitioners in England and Scotland conceptualize and operationalize intersectionality in their work. Mixed-method qualitative case studies of intersectionality's conceptualization and use were conducted within three networks of equality organizations in three cities in England and Scotland, from 2016 to 2018. These networks bring together racial justice, feminist, disability rights, LGBTI rights, migrants' rights organizations, and intersectional combinations of these. The case studies were participatory and ethnographic. For one year and six months, Christoffersen attended semi-regular meetings and events of equality networks and participated in their email lists. Networks were involved in the development of research questions and design, and some participants conducted data collection and recruitment.

Within the case studies, four methods were employed: interviews; participant observation; document analysis; and a focus group conducted with one network. Equality networks (rather than solely organizations) were selected because they represent a site of dialogue and joint working where there is not necessarily a significant tradition of or space for this within the equality NGO sector and movements. This is particularly important in a context where equality seeking has predominantly been conducted in "single strand" or "siloeed" ways, and where solidarity and coalition are undermined by austerity politics (Bassel and Emejulu 2017a). Networks of equality organizations, representing a joining up of single-issue equality areas, create opportunities for dialogue and solidarity building that might engender or further intersectional meaning and practice. Networks were selected that include different types of equality organizations, explicitly take an intersectional approach, and have a

policy intermediary, representative role. Christoffersen’s background as a practitioner in the sector was key to participant recruitment. The selected networks aim broadly at cooperation to address identity-based inequality, and advance equality, and work predominantly at local level. They tend, at decision-making levels, to be composed of relatively powerful organizations in their respective sub-sectors. These organizations are predominantly “single strand” and have been established for some time. Individuals, organizations, networks, and cities are anonymized; all names used are pseudonyms.

The data shared in this article draw primarily on research with feminist organizations: in-depth, semi-structured interviews with practitioners, senior managers, and directors, participant observation, and document analysis. Data concerning projects targeted toward disabled women were gathered through analysis of documents about and produced by the projects; participant observation at a meeting concerning one of the projects; and interviews. Documents are not quoted from directly since they are anonymized. Documents were analyzed with respect to how they define intersectionality, explicitly and implicitly, and what influenced work and knowledge in this area; how intersectionality was operationalized in the context of specific activities to which the documents pertain (identified by participants as “intersectional” work, such as the projects discussed below); assumptions and implicit meanings; omissions and exclusions; and framing.

Data concerning debates about trans rights draw on participant observation at network meetings, the focus group, document analysis, and interviews across equality sub-sectors. Participant observation and the focus group provided insight into the interaction of participants/network members representing different “strands,” having divergent histories and movements that have constructed them, and different interests: the possibilities for solidarity, and the challenges and conflict involved. Analysis of these data has centrally involved “asking the other question” (Crenshaw 1991; Matsuda 1991): for example, in research with women’s organizations, asking how are race, disability, and gender identity constructed and/or omitted here?

The English and Scottish women’s organizations included are service providers ( $n = 2$ ) and engaged in policy advocacy ( $n = 2$ ); one service provider is large (thirty plus staff) while the remaining organizations are small (ten staff or fewer). Six single-issue feminist organizations participated in the research (alongside network staff and twenty-three other organizations from other equality sub-sectors (Deaf, disabled, faith, LGBTI, racial justice, migrants’ rights, trans) and intersectional combinations, the latter including one disabled women’s organization, one Black and minority ethnic (BME) women’s organization and two BME women of faith organizations. Two policymakers were also interviewed. For the purposes of the project, which was predominantly concerned with practice in organizations, in terms of individual positionality the equality subsector that the participant represents is the most important characteristic to contextualize them alongside their data. This is

usually synonymous with an aspect or aspects of the identity of the participant (given that equality organizations are mainly led and staffed by their target communities). All other marginalized characteristics tend to be underrepresented in specific sector organizations, and all sectors but the racial justice and migrants' rights sectors or intersectional organizations including work on race and/or ethnicity and/or migration status are white-led and predominantly white.

We will now move on to discuss our findings. We begin by establishing how feminist NGO sector practitioners and gender equality policymakers create a narrative that the feminist sector is the beacon of intersectional practice. We then turn to analyze empirical examples demonstrating that while feminist sector practitioners position themselves as the only true arbiters of intersectionality, they practice intersectionality in such a way as to reassert white supremacy and other structural inequalities in their organizations. These examples concern projects targeted toward disabled women and perceptions and conflicts regarding trans rights, selected because most "intersectionality" projects in the sector focus on disability, rather than race, which we find noteworthy and speaks to a broader European project of erasing race and putting disability in competition with race. Further, debates surrounding trans rights were rife during the period when the research was conducted and lack of agreement in this area, e.g. on the need to develop projects targeted toward trans women on par with those targeted toward disabled women, was identified by participants as a key challenge for intersectional solidarity. In other words, these examples emerged inductively from the data collected at this particular time and place concerning how practitioners conceptualize and operationalize intersectionality.

## Constructing the Feminist Sector as Intersectionality's Pathfinder

We will first offer examples of how practitioners represent themselves and their organizations as champions of intersectionality, and then turn to examine how such representations have a direct effect on how intersectionality is defined and practiced within these organizations.

Intersectionality's appropriation by feminist studies (Bilge 2013) is mirrored in perceptions held among some feminist academics, policymakers, and advocates that among equality-seeking NGOs, the feminist sector is the beacon of intersectional practice. This problematic unexamined assumption is reflected in methodological choices: a majority of research on intersectionality in practice has focused exclusively on feminist organizations (e.g. Evans 2016; Lépinard, 2014; for critiques of this approach, see Bassel and Emejulu 2017a, 2017b). This perception was found among both prominent gender equality policymakers and feminist sector practitioners.

Women’s sector practitioners laid claim to intersectionality: for instance, Yvonne, director of a women’s organization in Scotland, stated: “we’re not just focused on the gender issue, we’re focused on the gender plus issues. Until very very recently, I think we were the only ones [among the equality organizations in the city] that had that overarching equality work.” Diane, a practitioner in a women’s organization in England, represented her work in a similar way: “successful services, sustainable services are built around that holistic approach, dealing with the whole woman, not just from a BME perspective or disabled perspective or an issue about class.”

As we can see from Diane’s claim, she constructs the women’s sector as the *only* sector which does “holistic” approaches, while the racial justice and disability rights sectors are constructed as limited and inherently inattentive to gender and women. Autonomous organizing by and for women of color and disabled women is effaced in both examples.

The perception that the single-issue, white-dominated feminist sector is the origin and pathfinder of intersectionality was echoed by policymakers. For instance, when asked about how she had encountered intersectionality, Margaret said: “It probably came from our [NGO] sector colleagues and . . . in particular the [single issue] women’s organizations . . . they started to talk about wanting to work to examine intersectionality.” While Margaret went on to name particular white-led feminist organizations, Black women’s organizations were reflected upon only when later specifically asked about: “Black women’s organizations had maybe a quicker grasp on it . . . than the more mainstream race organizations.” The implication was that while Black women’s organizations may have had a “quicker grasp on it” than racial justice organizations, really the white women’s sector was the leader.

While women’s sector practitioners claim that their sector is the only one really doing intersectionality, we argue that these kinds of (mis)representations of the feminist sector come at the expense of thoughtful and critical understandings and applications of intersectionality. We will now examine how ostensibly feminist organizations in England and Scotland practice intersectionality and the impact this has on both disability issues and trans rights in these organizational spaces.

### **Nothing About Us Without Us**

First, we introduce the particular way that feminist sector practitioners understand intersectionality which is central to understanding both empirical examples to follow. “Diversity within” is an applied concept of intersectionality which means addressing “intersections” within an equality strand: for example, differences among women (Christoffersen 2021). Gender remains the focus and is viewed implicitly or explicitly as more important than other inequalities. While this concept of intersectionality is related to single-issue organizing, it is not determined by it. Indeed, this additive “intersectionality”

was found to be the most prevalent applied concept of intersectionality among those in the women's sector, but importantly, this was not the case for any other single-strand sector (migrants' rights, racial justice, disabled, Deaf, LGBTQI+), nor was it true of any of the intersectional sectors included in the sample. Organizations applied intersectionality in multiple ways and some employed a constitutive understanding of intersectionality (Christoffersen 2021). In terms of individual positionality, "diversity within" was associated with dominant identities—cis, straight, middle-class white women (additive intersectionality serves to further the interests of singularly disadvantaged groups).

It is important to note that participants identified that additive intersectionality was conveyed to them and reproduced through on-the-job training and continuous professional development courses with other white-dominated feminist NGOs and white feminist academics advocating for this particular approach to intersectionality. This additive approach as represented in the training of NGO workers also served to reinforce the idea that white feminists "owned" intersectionality (Bilge 2013).

Here, Diane explains what intersectionality means to her. Since her answer exemplifies much of what there is to unpack in this additive understanding of intersectionality, it is worth quoting her at length:

Intersectionality is the new word . . . it has relevance . . . to the work that I do and that I'm focused on, so . . . obviously from my side it's more about sort of women and those things that are happening around women and particular groups of women as well and how those things work, and I'm sort of quite interested in sort of gathering and articulating how a response to that or almost sort of the baseline of any work that we go forward doing, how that impacts on access to services, how organizations stay sustainable, there are lots of issues that are emerging now that, are, forgive me if I just keep going on about women specific things, but the generalisation of services, about funds being cut, and how that recognition of intersectionality impacts on women's lot. It's quite, it's insidious. The, the prioritising of the individual I think is seriously damaging to women as a group. And those intersectional points, I think is why we need to be clear and articulate, how and when that affects, and keep the case going strongly for keeping those visible. That's, that's my focus.

For Diane, intersectionality is constructed as something which is relevant sometimes, but not all the time; and something which is inherently individualistic. She argues that the recognition of intersectionality is "insidious" for women "as a group." She sees it as her organizations' task to narrow down when intersectionality is relevant, implying that oftentimes, it is irrelevant. In other words, she and her organization consider intersectionality reluctantly. It

is important to note that few participants employing this understanding were openly reluctant about intersectionality. Indeed, most were enthusiastic about intersectionality as both a theory and a practice. It is only through the comparison of participants’ narratives that this reluctance becomes readily apparent. This understanding of intersectionality as additive (instead of being mutually constitutive with gender, other strands—race, class, sexuality, disability, and legal status—are perceived as being only nominally relevant and only some of the time) reflects an understanding of gender which is almost wholly blind to and arguably hostile to race, class, sexuality, disability, and legal status.

In practice, use of additive intersectionality often involves developing projects targeted at particular groups of women, driven by demographic analysis of service users by equality characteristics, frequently instituted as a funding requirement in light of the 2010 Equality Act. Feminist organizations have not always embraced intersectionality and developed projects out of new political understandings and goodwill. Rather, they have often been driven by equality monitoring requirements of funders revealing their exclusion of women experiencing intersectional disadvantage, even though they are funded to serve “all” in a given geographic community of identity.

Which intersections are targeted is a matter for analysis. There is a clear pattern in the data of white-led/predominantly white organizations, not only women’s organizations, developing work around disabled people/disability/access which they describe as their “intersectional work.” Perhaps these organizations feel more confident, and perceive it as in some ways easier,<sup>2</sup> to develop focused work on (de-raced) disability than it is to address issues of race, racism, and gendered racism. In other words, they may be more willing to acknowledge ableism than white supremacy; perhaps ableism is easier to accommodate within this deficit model where other inequalities are constructed as “additional barriers,” given discourses of paternalism relating to medical models of disability well-documented by disabled scholars ([Shakespeare, Iezzoni, and Groce 2009](#)). A concomitant pattern is white-led/predominantly white organizations (LGBTI, women’s, disabled, networks) commenting that race is the “one area they struggle with,” which is a euphemism for their almost total lack of contact with people of color and their lack of skills, knowledge, and confidence to undertake anti-racist work and effectively work in partnership with people of color. For example, Susan, director of a disabled people’s organization, said:

Going back to examples like race, we’ve gone out, we’ve done engagement with race organizations. We’ll always keep doing that, so we’re not going to give up but we know that often [disabled BME] people will choose to stay belonging to those organizations . . . they’re not going to get heavily involved in our community when they’re involved in those communities.

As we can see, Susan offers problematic “cultural” narratives about “tight-knit communities” which she uses to rationalize why particular minority ethnic groups will not engage with her organization, thereby relieving her and the organization of responsibility to acknowledge and address white supremacy. As a result disabled people of color are particularly excluded from targeted, supposedly “intersectional” projects; there is a yawning gap between race and disability where little work exists at present.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, some organizations, cognizant of the origins of intersectionality, describe as their intersectional work either their own work with Black women (in the case of racial justice organizations), or seeking to widen their work with Black women and/or BME communities; for example, Anya, a practitioner in a racial justice organization, put it like this: “We would look at [intersectionality] more from a point of view of having Black women’s organizations involved . . . we would be looking to make sure that their concerns were not drowned out by the majority and always came to the fore.”

Comparison of three projects addressing violence against disabled women illustrates the problems of diversity within intersectionality (AD<sup>4</sup> 5–11, 42). These projects were all identified as “intersectional” by participants. Each project aimed broadly at increasing disabled women’s use of, and access to, anti-violence against women, and girls’ services, responding to the exclusion of disabled women from these services. These services emerged within single-issue women’s organizations and are subject to the exclusions of those organizations: they were not set up with disabled women in mind.

Two of the projects were initiated by nondisabled women’s organizations seeking to increase representation of disabled women among service users. Disabled women came to be identified as a priority because of equality monitoring: when looking at service user data, disabled women were found to be disproportionately underrepresented. For example, Helen, senior manager of a women’s organization in England, stated that her organization set up a targeted service because: “we were looking at some of our targets we were not meeting, we were thinking we weren’t meeting the needs of every [woman in the city] so we were looking at our performance against targets around deaf and disabled women.” Thus, even though Diane, the practitioner we introduced earlier, raised concerns about how intersectionality promoted individualism, we see that ostensible “intersectional service delivery” is driven not necessarily by a commitment to justice but by neoliberal performance management targets.

The projects’ focus was thus building the capacity of nondisabled women’s organizations to serve disabled women: a version of “acting for” or “doing to,” which fails to take into account disabled women’s agency and can be interpreted as paternalistic and part of a longer tradition of working on rather than with disabled women. In both of these projects, representation of disabled women among those running and directing the project was viewed as a bonus, not a necessity. Disabled women playing advisory roles were expected

to give up their time for free. There was not necessarily any outreach to the disabled people’s sector in project development or implementation, nor was there attention paid to other inequalities within the projects (e.g. race, class, and/or sexuality). These projects, conceptualized singularly and under neoliberal compliance pressures, were nevertheless viewed as intersectional success stories by their proponents. In one of these two white-led women’s organizations, perceived as being “good on race” by some racial justice organizations since it also had a “race” project, its disability project was developed without race, or rather, whiteness was taken for granted: imagery depicted only white people, race was not highlighted in the documentation, monitoring information revealed that the project beneficiaries were c. 95 percent white while none were Black, and outreach reported did not include any racial justice or BME organizations (AD 42). This was possible because in additive applications of intersectionality, inequalities are conceptualized as being legitimately able to be added and subtracted at will, rather than being viewed as mutually constitutive. Some single-issue women’s organizations may therefore have targeted projects which may be deemed successful, but these are not necessarily “layered” and certainly not intersectional, and thus can be conceptualized and managed entirely separately within an (even quite small) organization. Nevertheless, the fact that such organizations have multiple projects targeted toward particular groups of women experiencing intersecting inequalities makes them heralded for their commitment to intersectionality, and bolsters the misperception held by some academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike that feminist organizations are more committed to intersectionality than other single-issue equality sectors.

In contrast, a third project led by a network of equality organizations focused on developing disabled-women-led peer support services, in other words it centered the agency of disabled women. This project aspired to be disabled-women-led and survivor-led as a core guiding principle. Building relationships with the disabled people’s sector in developing and implementing the project was viewed as essential from the outset. It was the only of the three similar projects which centrally involved women of color in decision-making and integrated consideration of race, sexuality, and trans status along with gender and disability, consistent with a constitutive rather than an additive understanding of intersectionality. The representation of disabled women’s organizations and women of color in decision-making capacities was critical to the project developing in this way. Disabled women (conceptualized as diverse across other characteristics, rather than as a monolithic group) were viewed as agential, and their social position as mutually constituted rather than additively formed.

In spite of the notable differences in the projects driven by competing concepts of intersectionality, for practitioners employing diversity within intersectionality, intersectionality needs to stop there, or else they would have to admit that they are not really doing intersectionality. Diversity within

“intersectionality” has all of the limitations of gender-first approaches to equality which efface women of color’s experiences that are widely critiqued elsewhere (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hankivsky 2005). The “diversity within” intersectionality practiced by the women’s sector fails to recognize relationality and the simultaneity of power and oppression insofar as it is additive. For this reason, it tends to view marginalized groups as solely oppressed, and those experiencing intersecting inequalities as having “additional barriers” in a deficit model. Within it, other aspects of identity may be able to be incorporated as “barriers,” but this tends to be limited to one.

Since intersectionally marginalized women are constructed as nonagenial and unable to participate in decision-making about the projects, the more powerful, singularly disadvantaged, white, nondisabled women directing the projects are therefore implicitly constructed as ideal “representatives” of intersectionally marginalized women. In the context of the women’s sector, this concept of intersectionality thus serves to further the association of “women” with whiteness and the construction of “woman” as always-already white (Lewis 2017).

We now turn to an empirical example concerning debates over trans rights, which further demonstrates the problems of additive intersectionality in practice. Additive intersectionality ultimately refuses meaningful engagement with structures of inequality other than a totalizing concept of gender which centers the interests of white and otherwise privileged women, thereby enacting violence on trans women and reinscribing white supremacy and ableism both within organizations and outside them.

## White Feminism and Trans Rights

A key challenge for intersectional practice that research participants identified was the opposition and resistance of some single-issue women’s organizations to the expansion of rights of trans people in general and trans women in particular, in the context of proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004 by Westminster and Holyrood, respectively. This act makes provision for legal change of gender on birth certificates. Important proposed reforms that would simplify what is currently a difficult, bureaucratic, and heavily medicalized process were ultimately abandoned in England and at the time of writing are in discussion in the Scottish Parliament.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to “intersectional” projects focused on disabled women, there were no projects targeted toward trans women delivered by women’s organizations in the sample. The following section will explore why, and what this lack of provision for trans women indicates about the meanings given to “intersectionality” by women’s organizations.

In one equality network, a women’s organization circulated a policy document concerning the local equality strategy on the email list of the inner

governing circle of the network. The document, which had been submitted to an influential local policymaker, asserted that trans rights were not “real” rights, and constructed these rights as being in opposition to, and detrimental to, “women’s” rights (AD 28). The existence of trans women was effaced in putting these groups into opposition, constructing them as being mutually exclusive, thereby denying categorical intersection (Hancock 2013). Significantly, the same document later goes on to mention how important it is that equality policy consider intersectionality, here conceptualized as additive. The circulation of this document engendered a breakdown of solidarity in the network. To an extent, the network LGBTI organization representative felt supported by the dismayed responses of others to the circulation of the email in their next meeting. On the other hand, they felt unsupported by the fact that it was left to them to raise it, making it seem to them that they were the only one to view it as problematic.

Intersectionality is fundamentally about recognition of the interrelation of structures of inequality (particularly race, class, and gender). Yet recognition of, and engagement with, the interrelationship of inequality structures, requires a prior step of recognizing the ontology of the structures themselves. This refusal to do so is reflected not only among white feminist academics who appropriate the language of intersectionality but fail to name or recognize white supremacy, instead bending and stretching intersectionality in the interests of white women—but also among practitioners. Many feminist sector practitioners employing additive understandings of intersectionality do not recognize a structure of inequality affecting trans people, as illustrated by the quote below. Recognition of this structure of inequality is particularly problematic for the women’s sector, since it offers fundamental challenges to core beliefs and assumptions on which many organizations are premised (ideas of gender as a binary power relation between women and men, and of gender as a fixed, biological status). The structure of inequality affecting trans people has been variously theorized, but the emerging consensus in trans studies is that it is best theorized as cisgenderism, an ideology that “denies, denigrates, or pathologizes . . . [that] creates an inherent system of associated power and privilege” (Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63).

The related term “cisgender” emerged from transfeminism (Serano 2007) and activism as an alternative to nontransgender, to disrupt the normativity of “man” and “woman” meaning nontransgender by default (Johnson 2013). The term “cisgender” was rejected by Yvonne, director of a single-issue white-led women’s organization, in a different city:

I [got really angry] at a meeting because somebody called me a cis woman. And I said, "You don't get to define me." I don't like the term cis because it's never been said to me as a description, it's been said to me as an accusation. I am not-You do not have the right. You have not earned the right to call me a cis woman just because that's your

community as a trans community, as a trans woman because that's what you use.

Here she is expressing discomfort with the idea of cisgender privilege. This was a fairly common position taken by women's sector organizations and thus, in that city, relations between prominent women's sector organizations and the LGBTI sector had broken down.

A women's organization that others had said was "working on" trans inclusion had also signed the policy document seeking to exclude trans issues from equality debates described above (AD 28), yet this organization had also been heralded for its good practice on intersectionality. We suggest this may be indicative of the limits of additive intersectionality in practice, and its lack of attention to representation of intersectionally marginalized women in decision-making: inclusion of trans women in services provided within cisgendered spaces, or simple inclusion of those previously excluded from service provision, does not necessarily signify any change in issue agendas, nor does it signify a lack of discriminatory attitudes, or a commitment to intersectional transformation. It may be that some organizations feel compelled to work toward inclusion by their equality sector peers, while others are compelled by equality and diversity funding requirements, against what they actually desire to do. For these organizations, binary trans identity is incorporated merely as an additional barrier *among women*, but the relationship between sexism and cisgenderism is left uninterrogated.

Yet other participants in the women's sector with additive understandings of intersectionality have been able to incorporate *binary trans identity as another difference/additional barrier among women*, but they expressed their inability to incorporate *nonbinary gender identity* into either their perspectives or their services. For example, following discussion of their efforts to be more (binary) trans inclusive, Helen, senior manager in a women's organization in England, said:

I suppose the only thing for us is around ... gender neutrality ... it's important for us a woman-only organization to be able to emphasise the gendered nature of violence. So if there's a complete gender neutrality, which isn't really about trans women but just about the whole intersex [*sic*] or non-binary issues could impact on us being able to talk about women-only services and also perpetrators as being predominantly male. We want to be able to voice that.

Some can additively recognize inequality which marginalizes trans people and incorporate *binary female trans identity* as an "additional barrier" among women; *but they cannot incorporate the always-interlocking nature of sexism and cisgenderism*. Because of this, they are left with no framework in which to recognize *nonbinary gender* as a marginalized category. This identity presents a fundamental epistemological, ideological challenge to some of the bases on which these feminist organizations are constructed (namely understandings of

gender as a binary power relation). This example demonstrates the ways in which additive intersectionality refuses the idea that structures of inequality are always-interlocking. This refusal inherent to additive intersectionality in relation to *all* inequality structures is especially apparent in this example, because the particular ontologies of the inequality structures involved (sexism and cisgenderism) explicitly generate conflict around shared key concepts and categories (namely gender/“woman”). Meaningful engagement with cisgenderism would explicitly call into question practitioner understandings of gender, as a monolithic, white social structure, itself. Meaningfully engaging with white supremacy would *also* call gender/“woman” into question, but perhaps less explicitly. Nevertheless, this refusal illustrated by way of the example of cisgenderism is instructive for analyzing enduring refusals of white-led feminist organizations across Europe to meaningfully engage with white supremacy and structural racism, in spite of decades of Black and women of color feminist critique and theorizing.

Ultimately, intersectionality challenges single-issue white feminist organizations because they are reliant on essential ideas about their constituents, namely their wholly oppressed status. It is difficult to absorb an idea of the simultaneity of privilege/oppression when a whole organization is based on a static view of its constituents as oppressed. Absorbing this idea would also necessitate a redirection of agendas away from benefiting those with relative privilege, which is both predicated on and requires a reconceptualization of what the pertinent issues are facing an organization’s constituents. Perhaps intersectionality can be absorbed additively, until it requires a fundamental rethink of established political agendas invested in victimhood which is at odds with recognizing privilege; until it necessitates the transformation that intersectionality demands.

## Conclusions

In this article, we have attempted to examine how an implicit commitment to white supremacy, ableism, and cisgenderism shape how many ostensibly feminist NGOs conceptualize and practice intersectionality. Seemingly committed only to understanding gender as de-raced, de-classed, nondisabled, and de-sexualized, many feminist organizations advance an exclusive and excluding category of womanhood which universalizes straight, cis, nondisabled, and middle-class women to the detriment of all others. This commitment to a limited understanding of gender and gender inequality in turn warps how intersectionality is understood and applied in these organizations. Rather than taking the Black feminist challenge seriously and understanding how race, class, gender, disability, sexuality, and legal status are mutually constitutive, many feminist organizations demur and instead treat intersectionality as a pick and mix—where gender is always picked and, more often than not,

placed in competition with other intersecting inequalities. As a result, women seeking support from shrinking social welfare services are under-served, and worse still, poorly served, by being misrepresented as nonagentic victims of their own unfortunate “intersectional circumstances.”

The dynamics we have documented amongst some feminist organizations in England and Scotland should not come as a surprise. Indeed, feminist theory, feminist movements, and feminist organizations have always been wracked by these divisions—of marginalized groups theorizing their own experiences and wanting a feminist politics to not merely “include” them but rather to be fundamentally transformed as a worldview and a social relation so that care for many different kinds of people is at the heart of any kind of radical revisioning of the present and future. It remains unclear whether feminist organizations have the courage to rethink their practices. As additive intersectionality becomes routinized in the sector, we have grave doubts about its future as radical framework for justice and equality.

## Notes

1. Work around disabled women is enacted in projects; around trans rights, in a lack of projects, due to lack of agreement on the need for this work.
2. This is not to at all imply that disability justice work is *actually* easy.
3. There are, however, BME disabled people’s organizations who work at this intersection, although these have been hit particularly badly by austerity. Also, some disabled people’s organizations do make substantial efforts to engage BME disabled people.
4. Each document analyzed has been listed in a database and been renamed as “Anonymous Document [number].”
5. <https://www.scottishtrans.org/our-work/gender-recognition-act-reform-2022/>

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