

Intersectional feminism's definition of privilege



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An important concept in any critical approach that has the goal of challenging systems and structures of injustice is privilege. In very broad terms, privilege refers to an unfair advantage conferred to members of a dominating or oppressive group. A trait that is exclusive to the members of these groups is constructed and positioned to be the requirement for enjoying privilege. Privilege is essential in the maintenance of any oppressive and unjust system not only because it marks the divisions in the hierarchy of power, but also because it facilitates the imposition of injustice within these systems. By limiting privilege to only a set of individuals, the hierarchy of power is established between those who belong to the privileged group and those who belong outside of it. Since privilege confers the advantages to the privileged group, marginalized groups are deprived of economic, social, and political resources. In feminism, it is easy to assume that privilege would be conceptualized along gender lines. After all, feminism aims to challenge the oppressive system of patriarchy, which “ is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak” (Hooks 2). However, intersectional feminism recognizes that the patriarchy's mechanisms and structures do not operate in isolation to other systems of inequality. Intersectional feminism has expanded the definition of privilege beyond just gender to also encompass dimensions of race and class.

Intersectional feminism identifies the significant influence of race and ethnicity on the power relations that confer privilege to men. Peggy McIntosh notes that because “ hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was

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most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected" (10). The long history of colonization and imperialism by European nations have created the racial and ethnic hierarchy that privileges individuals who have been designated as "white". An important consequence of white privilege is that its situation within the racial hierarchy of power also bleeds over to gender hierarchies of power. McIntosh is herself a woman, and yet by examining her own position of privilege in terms of race, she recognizes that a white woman, while disadvantaged against white men, is also privileged and advantaged vis-à-vis people of color. She observes how she can "speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial" and "can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me" (McIntosh 11). A non-white man does not possess these advantages, even though in the conventional feminist framework, their status as male would suggest that they belong to the privileged group in the patriarchy. Inequalities based on race and ethnicity also do not conform to the simple white-non-white hierarchical structure. While the historical consequences of imperialism and colonialism have conferred privileges to white people, there are also hierarchies of power that operate among non-white ethnicities and non-Western societies. Barbara Cameron points out some of the complexities involved in racist attitudes operating within her Native American culture: "At times animosity exists between half-breed, full blood, light-skinned Indians, dark-skinned Indians, and non-Indians who attempt to pass as Indians" (44). There are privileges conferred to certain configurations of racial identity within Native American culture, just as there are in many other cultures around the world. Thus, privilege in intersectional feminism cannot be simply defined as unfair

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advantages afforded to men, but sets of advantages enjoyed by individuals based on their gender and race.

Another dimension to privilege identified by intersectional feminism is class. Given that racial hierarchies intersect with gender hierarchies, it is inevitable that class would also be involved in the systems of inequality as race and class have long been intertwined in creating and sustaining systems of oppression. Cameron, in reflecting upon the patriarchal oppression she experiences within her own Native American community, describes how her ideal society where her gayness can be accepted is embodied by the gay community in San Francisco: "The seemingly copacetic gay world of San Francisco becomes a mere dream after the panic leaves" (42). San Francisco is a wealthy city at the forefront of technological and cultural development, and thus provides a space where patriarchal structures can be challenged. The wealth of San Francisco's citizens are privileged to actually tackle issues relating to the gendered hierarchies of power, such as homophobia and misogyny. This distinction can be applied on a larger scale, as first world, developed countries in their wealth can afford to engage in challenges to the patriarchy, while those in the third world are hampered by the economic and political inequalities to even consider these issues of gender inequalities. Simona Sharoni's experience with a misogynist joke and its consequences further demonstrate the influence of class on privilege. The senior academic who made the joke at Sharoni and her colleague's expense was Dr. Richard Ned Lebow. After filing an official complaint, Lebow responded by dismissing the incident as frivolous, then contacted the media. The media coverage of the incident put Sharoni at a disadvantage, silencing her side of the incident

and making the public accept Lebow's position that Sharoni's complaint was shallow and harmless (Sharoni 145). Moreover, Sharoni's professional credentials were put into question because of the media coverage. Men were in the positions of power both in the academic institution and in the media, and the privilege of silencing a person from making their position known to the public is a product of both the gender hierarchy and the economic and social class of the men who controlled the academe and the media.

Even within gender hierarchies, the framework that conceptualizes men as privileged and men as underprivileged is inadequate to accurately identify the operation of power relations and oppression. There are privileges also enjoyed by straight/heterosexual individuals that are unavailable to LGBTQ individuals. In the same way that McIntosh notes that she can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting her race on trial, a heterosexual woman does not have to deal with putting her gender identity on trial but a transsexual woman will have to. Sharoni's experiences in the aftermath of her experience with Lebow and the media coverage of her complaint demonstrates the complexity of the mechanisms of privilege even within gender identity. While the hostile online comments Sharoni received included the expected anti-feminist, misogynist backlash for her complaint against Lebow, many of the comments also included homophobic comments. Cameron identifies the multiple levels of inequalities that operate in her lived experience, noting specific configurations of oppression that involve homophobia: " We not only must struggle with the racism and homophobia of straight white america, but must often struggle with the homophobia that exists within our third world communities" (45). Homophobia and

transphobia intertwine with racial and feminist issues, with each configuration having their own specificities on how they confer privilege to certain individuals while excluding others from these advantages. Even within gender, it is problematic to consider only the hierarchy of power as giving privilege to men, as heterosexual men and women enjoy unearned advantages over people who have non-binary gender identities.

It is important to expand the definition of privilege beyond male privilege because a critical aspect of what gives privilege its power is that those who possess it are not made aware that they possess such privileges. As McIntosh notes, "As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage" (10). The distinction may seem small, but there is a significant impact in making privilege invisible to those who possess it. One of the consequences of making the advantages of privilege invisible is that it makes the systems of oppression seem natural and unquestionable. Bell Hooks criticizes feminists who reduce the problem of patriarchy to defeating men as the enemy: "feminist advocates collude in the pain of men wounded by patriarchy when they falsely represent men as always and only powerful, as always and only gaining privileges from their blind obedience to patriarchy" (4). Men, unaware of the advantages and disadvantages of privilege in patriarchy, end up lacking the self-awareness to recognize that they are becoming agents of patriarchal oppression and domination. Another consequence of making the effects of privilege invisible to those who possess it is that they end up not being aware of the other interlocking and

intersecting hierarchies of power that determine what set of privileges they have access to. A heterosexual black woman in the United States ends up not knowing that she has unearned advantages over an Indian lesbian suffering extreme poverty, thus unknowingly contributing to the maintenance of the patriarchy with her beliefs and actions.

In conclusion, the definition of privilege is not limited to male privilege in the context of intersectional feminism. The broader perspective of intersectional feminism acknowledges that oppression, inequality and privilege are products of complex processes that involve gender, race, and class. To isolate one of these dimensions, specifically gender, and designate its hierarchy as the only source of privilege would be to deny the other forms of oppression that all have a bearing on the everyday lived experiences of marginalized people. Moreover, restricting privilege to a model that only distinguishes between male privilege and disadvantaged females contributes to the sustaining aspect of the patriarchy that makes the operation of privilege invisible to members of the privileged group. This obscures the mechanism of privilege and how it puts certain groups of people at a disadvantage. As a result, it becomes more difficult to challenge these structures of inequality, as one cannot challenge something that one cannot conceive. Thus, the intersectional feminist definition of privilege considers race, class, and non-binary gender identities as all contributing to a set of advantages that translate to different kinds of privileges depending on the configurations of these dimensions.

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