The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) is a research institute that provides tools and research to organizations taking action to advance social justice and equality for all women. CRIAW recognizes women’s diverse experiences and perspectives, creates spaces for developing women’s knowledge, bridges regional isolation, and provides communication links among researchers and organizations actively working to promote social justice and women’s equality.

Through a new strategic focus, Women's Economic and Social Justice: Overcoming Poverty and Exclusion (2004-2008), CRIAW has been in the process of exploring the application of alternative feminist theories and practices to its social and economic justice work towards equality for all women. Intersectional Feminist Frameworks is our new emerging vision. In our upcoming work, we will be focusing on alternative approaches to women’s social and economic justice.

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How, in a country which boasts eight consecutive years of budget surpluses have Canadians allowed poverty to persist and grow? Among those most affected are women and children. One in seven (2.4 million) women are now living in poverty; Aboriginal women, lone mothers, senior women, women with disabilities and racialized and immigrant women are disproportionately represented among the poor.

Why have the efforts of groups working towards social justice and the elimination of poverty and social exclusion been slow to create systemic change? Despite the efforts of many committed Canadians and years of debate and various initiatives by governments, we seem to have made little headway. In fact, poverty has intensified for marginalized groups.

One challenge that feminist and social justice advocates face is that our approaches have not kept pace with the growing complexity of contemporary social, political, economic and cultural conditions.

Based on our work in women’s movements, CRIAW believes that different and diverse approaches are urgently needed in struggles for social and economic justice. Accordingly, in the last two years, CRIAW has begun developing intersectional feminist frameworks (IFFs).

This critical reflection piece introduces and explores CRIAW’s emerging thinking around the contributions of IFFs to alternative approaches to re-envisioning policy change and advocacy. It aims to facilitate a deeper understanding within women’s and social justice organizations of IFFs, which can contribute towards a more just world for all citizens.
Why IFFs?

CRIAW has, for some years now, been engaged in a process of reconsidering mainstream approaches to questions of social and economic justice, particularly the ways in which feminist lenses are applied to government policies. One case in point is gender-based analysis (GBA). Over the last ten years, the Canadian government and many women’s and social justice organizations have adopted GBA to address the differential impact of policies and programs on women and men.

IFFs attempt to understand how multiple forces work together and interact to reinforce conditions of inequality and social exclusion.

While GBA has brought greater awareness of women’s inequality relative to men, a “gender only” lens that primarily looks at differential gender impacts or discrimination between women and men fails to account for the complexity of women’s lives. Prioritizing one identity entry point (i.e. gender) or one relation of power (i.e. patriarchy) to the exclusion of others (i.e. race, class) misrepresents the full diversity of women’s lived realities.

IFFs attempt to understand how multiple forces work together and interact to reinforce conditions of inequality and social exclusion. IFFs examine how factors including socio-economic status, race, class, gender, sexualities, ability, geographic location, refugee and immigrant status combine with broader historical and current systems of discrimination such as colonialism and globalization to simultaneously determine inequalities among individuals and groups.

As an emerging vision, IFFs have the potential to open new spaces for transformation by examining not only the complex factors operating in women’s and men’s lives that keep them marginalized, but also how they are often able to respond to those forces in creative and innovative ways that ensure their survival and allow them to live their lives with some measure of dignity. IFFs seek to validate and acknowledge the efforts of marginalized women and men to bring about change.

IFFs: Emerging Approaches and Principles

CRIAW’s evolving work on developing IFFs is grounded in conversations representing many different views. While there are differences among them, common themes underlying IFFs include:

• Employing multi-pronged, multi-dimensional analyses;

• Centering policy analyses on the lives of those most marginalized;

• Refusing to think within policy divides that do not comprehend women’s lives in holistic ways and keep women alienated;
• Acknowledging that power relations shape feminist and social justice politics and research. Feminist and social justice organizations are also embedded in relations of power and privilege so that it is necessary to always remain self-reflective about our own positioning in relations of power;

• Validating alternative world views and knowledge that have historically been marginalized;

• Understanding that varying groups of women experience diverse histories that position them differently in hierarchical social relations of power and give rise to different social identities;

• Challenging binary thinking (i.e. able/disabled; gay/straight; white/black; man/woman; West/East; North/South) taken as definitive; and

• Revealing how such conceptual limitations are both the outcome of and foster, social rankings and unequal power relations.  

      *  *  *

Given these common themes, it is possible to identify that on principle, IFFs are:

• Fluid, changing, and negotiated rather than fixed, inherent or absolute;

• Historically, politically, geographically, ecologically, and culturally specific and interactive;

• Locational, situational and particular rather than universal; and

• Diverse rather than singular in their approach to issues (multiple entry points rather than one).

      *  *  *

In the processes of engaging with IFFs, CRIAW strongly believes in the transformative and analytical potential of IFFs in effecting social change. Thus, this critical reflection piece lays out our emerging vision of IFFs so that it can be used by women’s and social justice organizations to reflect upon, analyze, and transform:

• The development, content, and delivery of programming activities, such as workshops, conferences, forums, and seminars;

• The analysis, design of and recommendations for public policies, such as immigration or welfare policies; and

• The internal policies and ethics of social justice organizations.
Internationally

The concept of the intersectionality of different grounds of oppression is not new; it emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in a variety of contexts. In the United States and Canada, it grew out of the inadequacies of the mainstream feminist movement to address the issues, concerns and struggles of racialized women.

Over the past four decades, the many United Nations sponsored conferences on women have provided significant opportunities for women from different countries, classes, races, sexualities and nationalities to come together to debate and articulate visions for gender equality and alternatives to mainstream approaches. Most recently, intersectional analysis arose within the context of the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. With the tremendous contributions of women from the ‘global South’ and Indigenous and racialized women within the ‘global North,’ the issues, diversity and multiplicity of feminism are brought to the forefront, in particular the intersectionality of gender with sexuality, class and race.

In Canada

The relevance of advancing alternative intersectional frameworks for women’s equality can be attributed to several interrelated factors. Foremost in driving this initiative are the diverse voices of women in contemporary Canadian women’s movements. Today’s women’s movements are increasingly diverse, consisting of many voices, representing many different sectors of society. No longer can socially-dominant groups assume that their identities and interests are representative of all women.

The history of women’s movements in Canada has been one of change. Second wave feminists put the issue of gender equality on Canada’s political agenda, making considerable gains
through their struggles. They demanded full inclusion in citizenship, the right to participate in the public sphere, and the right to share equally in the resources of the state. GBA was one major outcome of this movement.

Governments and non-governmental organizations slowly began implementing GBA in response to second wave feminist activism and international human rights lobbying. GBA developed out of what is now an out-dated traditional liberal feminist definition of gender: the universal categorization of “women” as one discrete group in opposition to “men” based primarily on biological differences. In this definition, women are one coherent group without differences based on race, ability, sexuality, class or other factors.

Many women continue to feel unrepresented or misrepresented as most government policies still prioritize a male/female analysis, with little space for any other categorization or self-identification.

Overall, second wave feminism left many women behind. Throughout the second wave, minority women’s movements challenged the assumption that white middle class women could make claims to represent all women when many were unable to identify with this homogenous definition. These feminists argued that marginalized women had rights to represent themselves based on their particular knowledge and lived experiences. Race, ethnicity, sexualities, class or country of origin may be equally if not more important to how women experience their lives and to how society defines them.

CRIAW sees gender as only one relationship of power. Using IFFs, social categories such as race, class, gender, sexualities, abilities, citizenship, and Aboriginality among others, operate relationally; these categories do not stand on their own, but rather gain meaning and power by reinforcing and referencing each other.

GBA has been important in mainstreaming a gender-sensitive perspective into the work of governmental and non-profit organizations. Recently, there has been a move within GBA to incorporate a diversity lens, without fully incorporating more recent feminist theories around difference. Instead, GBA continues to concentrate on differences between men and women, treating each category as a unitary, one-dimensional category of analysis that obscures the differences among and between women. From government to civil society, while these identity politics were extremely important in opening up spaces for marginalized women to speak, it failed to go beyond issues of representation and recognition.

Further, in debating questions of authority and authenticity — who should speak about what and why — and in claiming categories on our own terms, identity politics will not independently destroy underlying systems and structures of disempowerment, though empowering for some. These feminist movements also brought new efforts within second wave
feminism to “add on” other social categories to gender. Such “add and stir” approaches, however, continued to neglect the interconnecting root causes of women’s disempowerment and continuing marginalization.

Feminist thought and activism into the limitations of GBA demonstrate that applying only one entry point into analysis simplifies and reduces what are actually very complex systems of oppression. CRIAW sees gender as only one relationship of power, narrowly understood as sex discrimination between men and women, and insufficient to move women’s equality forward. GBA cannot be viewed as the primary or most important lens of analysis in the women’s movements. Even when gender is understood as a complex social construction, involving other grounds of discrimination, not all problems facing women will be visible by prioritizing a gender based analysis. Moreover, problems in government implementation of a more complex GBA model have not been resolved.  

Today, the landscape of the feminist struggle has changed. Many women who have invested years in putting issues central to marginalized women onto the political agenda are moving away from or bypassing identity politics and focusing their energies elsewhere. Participants in today’s women’s movements have worked to take apart categories such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, citizenship, disabilities, and sexualities to show how categories of identity are socially constructed. Using IFFs, social categories such as race, class, gender, sexualities, abilities, citizenship, and Aboriginality among others, operate relationally; these categories do not stand on their own, but rather gain meaning and power by reinforcing and referencing each other.

A focus on gender based discrimination alone fails to recognize and address the multi-faceted causes and impacts of marginalization on the lives of women most adversely affected by poverty and exclusion locally and globally. For example, the role of colonization in the marginalization and oppression of indigenous women or the role of globalization in the lives of women living in more disadvantaged countries worldwide are inseparable from their gender. In recognizing how relations of power intersect to structure women’s lives, gender is no longer sufficient to generate a deeply complex analysis.

Feminists working within the government must confront a very resistant system and may have to limit their discussions about gender-based policy analysis to make women’s equality acceptable. Nonetheless, while acknowledging the challenges of changing state practices and ideologies, the women’s movements must not accept these terms as our own. Gender based strategies in their various incarnations of GBA, gender budgeting and gender mainstreaming are limited and will not advance the equality of women who are most marginalized. Alternatives are needed.
After 500 years of refinement through colonizing and nationalizing regimes within capitalist and patriarchal structures, it will not be easy to unravel and reveal these shifting and intersecting webs of oppression. What are urgently needed are alternative frameworks which move beyond western models which idealize the advancement of the individual disconnected from families and communities. IFFs provide potentially transformative alternatives. They unravel how social categories of difference intersect in constantly changing ways in order to crack open oppressive dialogues, structures and practices. This is the first task ahead.

Today, the struggle for equality is being fought from many different levels and perspectives. Strategies of coalition building, networking, and grassroots community building continue to offer important insights and help the women’s movements build strength and resistance. Social justice work in policy and activism has clearly shown that institutional policies and practices mediate women’s lives in complex ways. Social justice work demands thinking and acting at the local, national and the global levels simultaneously because mechanisms of power are interconnected across time and space. Building different and better visions requires valuing and learning from indigenous knowledge.

As women’s movements are now globally connected, a much more plural, diverse range of tools and resources for analysis and activism are available to challenge dominant powers. Shifting to IFFs is one way to access the range of marginalized knowledge that is available to social justice activists around the world.
traditions within Canada and from our sisters and brothers in the South.

How and where social justice and feminist activists begin their analysis depends on the specific conditions of the lives of those with whom they are working. While there are multiple points of entry, engagement and discussion, these cannot be determined in advance. IFFs are flexible and open to shifts and changes in the political, social, economic and cultural order. As women's movements are now globally connected, a much more plural, diverse range of tools and resources for analysis and activism are available to challenge dominant powers. Shifting to IFFs is one way to access the range of marginalized knowledge that is available to social justice activists around the world.

New Visions

This section explores how IFFs can be used by women’s and social justice organizations for internal restructuring and action and for rethinking external policies and practices to be more reflective of the full diversity of women’s experiences in Canada.

The first example describes CRIAW’s evolving organizational journey towards IFFs in order to demonstrate the challenges for organizations who want to make that shift. It requires critically reviewing internal operations and structures to be more reflective of diverse women’s interests and experiences. Two concrete examples of how IFFs might bring about different understandings and strategies for change within immigration & refugee policies and anti-poverty campaigns are also highlighted.

CRIAW’s Journey

CRIAW’s journey over the past 30 years (1976–2006) reflects the same struggles as those found within women’s movements. CRIAW has been challenged by its board, staff and constituencies to have structures, policies, and programs that are representative of all women. This ongoing process has brought tensions and struggles both internally and externally. People have had to set aside focusing on one existing framework to learn to open up to multiple perspectives and different voices. CRIAW is still in the processes of trying to bring together an organization reflective of the full diversity of women in Canada.

Struggles against patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and globalization have brought conflict but have also forced the organization to rethink its priorities. Since its foundation, CRIAW has been aware that women from various backgrounds are marginalized and that CRIAW’s own board and staff should be more representative.

In the 1980s, board and staff realized that many women were not engaged in CRIAW’s work on women’s equality. Attempts were made to become more inclusive by ‘adding’ to its structures ‘one single category’ of women at a time. For instance, in an effort to become
bilingual, CRIAW developed policies in the early 80s that ensured greater representation from francophone Quebec on its board. It also began conducting research in French, translating most publications into French, and later increased representation of francophone women outside Quebec. Despite these efforts, CRIAW has yet to become a fully bilingual organization in which many Francophone women benefit from activities or are involved.

Diverse groups of women criticized CRIAW for not providing spaces for more marginalized women to speak. CRIAW began to seriously reconsider the representation of marginalized women within its structures, publications, conferences, and alliances with many feminist movements. Lesbians argued that they remained invisible in CRIAW’s conferences as well as in CRIAW’s work in general. By this time, the organization also acknowledged the lack of representation of Aboriginal women and tried to collaborate more with Aboriginal and northern women by organizing a conference in the North. To this day, CRIAW has no Aboriginal women on its board and is still trying to find ways to collaborate with Aboriginal feminist organizations.

In the early 90s, CRIAW sought to reach racialized and immigrant women by organizing one of the first national conferences on feminism and anti-racism. This conference, held in Toronto in 1992, attracted over 1,000 participants. At the same time CRIAW also engaged in discussions as to how one defines feminism, and how to be more accessible to women in the community as well as younger and older women. In the mid 90s, CRIAW conducted its first study to document how it and other national equality seeking women’s organizations were moving towards becoming more inclusive and diverse, entitled *Looking Towards Change: How National Organizations Facilitate or Hinder Inclusion and Diversity.*

In the last five years (2000–2005), CRIAW has exposed the experiences of marginalized women via fact sheets on the intersection of race and gender, violence against women and girls, immigrant and refugee women, and women’s interaction with peace, security and poverty. CRIAW has produced publications on barriers faced by racialized women and Aboriginal women in academia, and conducted research using GBA, gender and diversity analysis, and integrated feminist analysis.

In 2004, a new board structure was designed for CRIAW, requiring representation from diverse regions and social groups. The aim was to become more consciously aware of equality in representation across multiple categories. The term Intersectional Feminist Frameworks (IFFs) arose out of a think tank CRIAW hosted in June 2005.

CRIAW’s transformation is still underway, but the organization’s focus has shifted to rethinking its internal structures and policies through the knowledge that multiple perspectives and different voices must inform all our work.
Intersectional Feminist Frameworks

From GBA to IFFs: Policies Directly Affecting Immigrant and Refugee Women

The limitations of a GBA perspective to examining policies affecting immigrant and refugee women and the added value of IFFs will be highlighted through three examples. A GBA perspective identifies discrimination flowing from immigration laws that position women as dependents of male spouses. For example, women are discriminated against in English language training programs because programs are designed to support labor market entry and are time limited. Women must often stay at home to raise children and settle the family, partly because patriarchal ideologies and practices limit many women's options. Programs often fail to adapt to or to challenge this reality. Moreover, courses do not provide adequate and or affordable child care so women can attend regularly. Immigrant and refugee families often cannot afford to pay for language courses and lack access to a social support network. Consequently, women's professional qualifications may erode over time, and they may remain isolated in a language ghetto.

IFFs not only look at gender relations but bring the global political economy into an analysis of immigration by examining World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other international free-trade policies. IFFs can show how conditions in both sending and receiving countries work together to push women and men to migrate in search of work, with unequal results. The economies of Canada and other western countries create a demand for low paid, highly skilled and yet vulnerable workers to service the growth of capital as well as to produce cheap products for consumption. The migration of women can be understood as situated at the junction where trade, labor, citizenship, education, training, social welfare, health, military, national security, and human rights policies meet. Women's migration and immigrant settlement can be analysed at intersecting levels of the individual, the ethnic collectivity, national and international structures.

IFFs offer a more nuanced and detailed examination of migrant women's lives by looking at historical links among colonialism, nation formation, economic globalization and immigration policies. Such approaches understand racism, sexism, ageism, and discrimination based on language and disability as embedded within immigration and refugee policies, not attributes of the individual or a consequence of migrant women's inability to adapt to the host society.

As another example, domestic worker advocacy groups have been trying for years to change the government's Live-in Caregiver Program which requires foreign domestic workers to live with their employer as a visa condition. Yet, despite their efforts, they have failed to convince the government and the public that the live-in requirement is discriminatory. Considerable evidence has shown that the live-in requirement increases women's vulnerability to abuse, exploitation, often unacceptable work conditions, and isolation. Although domestic worker advocacy groups have struggled to educate government, mainstream women and social
justice movements of their situation, this issue is still not seen as a serious social issue. One reason that many Canadians do not grasp the seriousness of this issue is that a gender only lens fails to take into account the inequalities that exist among women that permit women, from more affluent countries and classes to employ and oppress poorer women from developing countries. A GBA analysis is unable to account for the racialized and ethnicized stereotypes and discourses that make certain women suitable for paid domestic service. Under a GBA lens, it appears that this program is women friendly; Canadian women who require child care assistance are helped by migrant women who want to enter Canada to work, who hope to become citizens, and who would not otherwise be accepted as immigrants without a very long wait and much scrutiny.

IFFS would analyze the interconnections between the global and the local. The Live-In Caregiver Program provides wealthy Canadian families with nannies mainly from the Philippines and Caribbean. This program enables privileged Canadian women to work outside the home by taking advantage of women from the south who are trying to immigrate into Canada because there are few job opportunities in their home country and they would like more financial security for themselves and often for their families both in Canada and back home. By making this the only program/class that fully recognizes the skills associated with domestic and caring work, immigration policy makes it difficult for women with these skills to immigrate under other programs. 

Using IFFs, inclusion and exclusion are considered not only through economic lens, but also through social and cultural forces of citizenship and nation formation. With IFFs, issues can be redefined from “failure to integrate” to “failure to include.”
As a final example, a GBA approach recognizes gendered violence mainly because it fits within a sex discrimination model; however racism, homophobia, ability/disability and or the impact of globalization as triggering dimensions of violence may not be seen as a causal factor unless women’s advocacy organizations push these points.

IFFs facilitate resistance on multiple fronts, not just against gender discrimination. For example, IFFs identify that in a world migration system, Canada’s policies privilege white, Christian, English speaking, male applicants who have been educated in commonwealth countries. Racism and racialized discounting of labor and education will likely be reflected in labor market experiences of new arrivals, with racialized immigrant women faring poorly. In turn, they

may find themselves expelled from the formal to the informal, precarious and unregulated labor market. Policies must be formulated to ensure that racialized immigrant and refugee women do not form a labor market ghetto.

Immigration applicants from different parts of the world will face different challenges; IFFs consider the diversity of experience among different groups of immigrant women, recognizing that no continuous lack of discussion around colonization and citizenship and immigration laws that bring about the deepening of poverty experienced by indigenous, refugee and immigrant women.

IFFs attempt to examine the deepening of poverty experienced by racialized women as a result of present and historical social and economic policies. The impact of laws such as the Indian Act and the Immigration and Refugee
Protection Act are critical to the development and implementation of anti-poverty campaigns. Further, such laws interact simultaneously with additional provincial and federal policies impacting marginalized women locally as well as globally, in relation to labour, language, ability, migration, land, custody and access of children, health, age, sexuality, imprisonment, and education, among other realities women face.

Discourse regarding the feminization and racialization of poverty involves analysis of how processes of occupation, nation building, slavery, labour migration, employment regulation, and disenfranchisement of racialized groups, among others, contribute to the depth of poverty experienced by marginalized indigenous and racialized women. Therefore, within IFFs, the process of rethinking poverty would not only include economic disadvantage but also a process of social exclusion directed at the most marginalized women. Processes of exclusion impede marginalized women’s access to housing, childcare, education, employment, social services, occupations, and citizenship; thereby deepening the poverty experienced.

By implementing IFFs within anti-poverty campaigns, we recognize how systems of domination — patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism — reinforce each other to maintain power over the dispossessed and marginalized. Therefore, anti-poverty strategies must be fluid and representative of the diverse and complex legacies of dominant ideologies, while implementing social change from multiple entry points rather than only anti-capitalism.
Contributors

This critical reflection piece was written by members of the IFFs working group: Bénita Bunjun, Jo-Anne Lee, Suzanne Lenon, Lise Martin, Sara Torres and Marie-Katherine Waller.

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The ideas expressed in this document are those of CRIAW and do not necessarily reflect those of the Women’s Program, Status of Women, Canada.
Endnotes

1 CRIAW, “Women and Poverty Factsheet” (3rd edition). Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2005

2 A system of society or government dominated by men.

3 For more information on contributing frameworks to IFFs, please see CRIAW’s “Transforming our Social Justice Work: Towards Intersectional Feminist Frameworks” (2006) available on our website at www.criaw-icref.ca.

4 For example, statistical data is still not disaggregated and cross-referenced to enable meaningful intersectional comparisons.

5 The two examples on immigrant and refugee women have been selected among many other possible examples to illustrate the potential of IFFs to provide more critical and in-depth analysis into the complexity of women’s poverty and exclusion. IFFs can be used to examine many other women’s experiences of poverty and exclusion such as those of lone mothers or women with disabilities.


7 The change from “Integrated” Feminist Framework to Intersectional Feminist Frameworks arose because “integrated” is considered by Aboriginal women to be a synonym for assimilation. Frameworks has replaced framework because there are multiple contributing perspectives which inform the developing conceptual and methodological articulation of CRIAW’s IFFs.


CRIAW Resources

Information Tool:

• Disentangling the Web of Women’s Poverty and Exclusion (2006)

Factsheets:

• Women and Poverty (Third Edition — 2005)


• Immigrant Women and Refugees (2003)

• Women’s experience of racism: How race and gender interact (2002)

• Violence against Women and Girls (updated 2002)

• Women, Health and Action (2001)

The above publications are free of charge (posting and handling will be charged for requests of 10 copies or more). Aussi disponible en français.

★★★★
A Tribute to Grassroots Organizing for Women’s Health: Cases from Around the World, Editors: Sara Torres, Prabha Khosla with Nuzhath Leedham and Lise Martin (2005). $15 (+ $2 shipping and handling). This publication is available in French under the title: “Un hommage aux organisations communautaires vouées à la santé des femmes: Des réalisations aux quatre coins du monde”.

Participatory research and action: A guide to becoming a researcher for social change, Marika Morris, literature review: Martha Muzychka. (Reprinted 2003). $15 (+ $2 shipping & handling). This publication is available in French under the title: “La recherche-action participative — Un outil pour le changement social”.

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