Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Intersections of Aid: Women NGO workers' reflections on their work practices

Other

oro.open.ac.uk

Working Paper Series

Papers available in the Working Paper Series are works in progress. Please do not cite without permission. Any comments should be addressed directly to the author

Intersections of Aid: Women NGO workers' reflections on their work practices

Introduction

This paper seeks to untangle and analyse some of the tensions and complexities involved in feminist NGO practices. These tensions initially stem from the fact that the practices of western NGOs and development agencies have been criticised for their imperialist and colonial tendencies (Shiva 1989, Escobar 1995, Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Kothari 2005) while, at the same time western feminism has been critiqued assuming universalism of the experiences and needs of white western women (Lorde 1984, hooks 1981, 1986, Carby 1992, Lazreg 2000). While feminism embraces a number of theories that disclose power relations, structures of oppression and 'othering', it on the other hand been attacked for perpetuating unequal power relations. Western feminists have been challenged to recognise that categories of gender, race, class and sexuality intersect in the creation and maintenance of power relations. Furthermore, they were challenged to confront their own privileges.

In 2007-2008 I conducted 20 interviews with women, who worked either on a paid or on a voluntary basis for organisations that seek to support women in or from the global South[1]. All of these women were located in the 'global North', more specifically the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Belgium (Brussels) and Switzerland (Geneva). The NGOs these women worked for ranged from smaller to larger organisations, some of which were linked to the EU or UN and concentrated on different areas, such as health, development, refugees, and trafficking[2]. The interviews were semi-structured and explored among other things their feeling of responsibility, how the identity of the interviewees played out in their work, and their relationships with the group they are supporting. The focus of the interviews was how individual women NGO/IGO workers who work on women/gender issues in a global context negotiate their roles and their relations with the groups they seek to support.

---

[1] The term 'in or from the global South' refers to both organisations that have an international presence and 'target group' abroad and to those organisations that work on a national level with a target group that (originally) comes from abroad.

[2] Most of the organisations could be classed as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs); however, on their websites a few organisations rather self-described as platform, charity, non-profit organisation or network. Some of the organisations were Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs). These latter organisations were not NGOs in the strict sense of the term; however, if one follows Hilhorst's definition of NGO as 'doing good for the development of others', a definition which she calls the 'most common use' of the term NGO, it is easy to see the relevant commonality of the women interviewed (2003:7).

This chapter will first explore how the women NGO/IGO workers implicitly and explicitly responded to the critique of black feminists regarding the assumption of universality of the experiences of white western women. I will specifically refer to what Fellows and Razack coined 'the race to innocence' (1998). While the research participants shared the privilege of being located in the North and working for NGOs and IGOs that seek to improve the lives of women from the South; at the same time this group of women was internally heterogeneous, in terms of their nationality, age, ethnicity, career trajectory etc. Their experiences, positions and reflections thus displayed these commonalities and differences. Hence, the way the research participants experience their work and the relation with the women they seek to support will be analysed using an intersectional approach that takes account of overlapping categories of gender, ethnicity, nationality etc. that shape their experiences.

Race to Innocence

The idea of a universal shared identity of women globally neatly separated white women from the oppressions by men and masked the divisions between black and white women (hooks 2000). Fellows and Razack call the phenomenon where women believe that their sexist oppression is the most significant and where they deny their complicity in other oppressions 'the race to innocence' (1998:335). Noticing how frequently this 'race to innocence' occurred among feminists, they seek to trace the reasons why we are led into the 'trap of competing marginalities' (1998:339), where we compare oppressions and privilege 'our' oppressed position and why despite the intellectual theoretical understanding of multiple oppressions it proves so hard to acknowledge our complicity. They identify three reasons; 1) by not privileging the oppression we experience, we 'risk erasure' (ibid.), lack of acknowledgement of our subordination, 2) focussing on the oppression we experience is the first liberating step, 'a productive defensive response to oppression', 3) when we are in a dominant position, we tend to belittle the narratives of those who are oppressed as our own oppression does not make us immune to Othering (1998:339-340). Carby's observation (1992) that white women were reluctant to admit their complicity fearing it would divert attention from gender oppression supports the first reason suggested by Fellows and Razack. Frankenberg's interviews with white women about race also led her to conclude, similar to the third reason suggested, that white women's experience of discrimination did not lead them to compassion with other subordinated groups (1993).

In the interviews, I asked all women how they thought their identity played out in their work. While some interviewees included both dominant and subordinate elements of their identity in their answer, the 'race to innocence' can be traced in some of the silences concerning whiteness, nationality, class etc. When I asked Casey about how her identity played out in her work and specifically mention her nationality, her whiteness and her gender, she replies: '*The gender part of it is strong. The academic training I have undertaken, my education has played a strong role, it is very, it has been a contributing factor that, or rather maybe I should say, the difficulties I have faced have been related to my gender but also to my profession, having a non-technical education. This field in development has always been dominated by men in mainly technical positions, and very little respect has paid to the work of sociologists, and it is still a very difficult position I think*'. Casey here chooses to focus in her answer on her gender and her education leaving out her nationality and her whiteness despite specific prompting from my side. Interestingly, she mentions her specific academic education as an obstacle, due to the bias in her field towards technical studies without reflecting on the privilege of academic education. Frankenberg experienced difficulties at the start of research in finding white women who were prepared to talk about race (1993). She relates the resistance she encountered when introducing her research to the fact that for white women the only apparent options concerning their attitude towards race was 'either one does not have anything to say about race, or one is apt to be deemed 'racist' simply by virtue of having something to say' (Frankenberg 1993:33).

Similarly, Elisa when I ask her the same question about how her identity impacts her work, she first focuses on her identity as a feminist. Also after I ask a second question related to whether her identity can sometimes be a barrier in terms of relating to others, she continues to talk about her feminist identity. To my next question which specifically asks her whether she thinks her nationality, coming from the West, her whiteness, her age, also impact her work she replies: *Oh, that is very beneficial, [the city in Europe where I am located] is a destination, especially for the women from the middle east to reach without problems, visa problems we can take care of, it is not an issue for them to come here*' and then jumps to the impact of her feminist identity again. Fellows and Razack, drawing on Lugones's work, point out that those of the dominant identity category, white people, heterosexual people, men, middle-class people, do not need to define themselves in terms of the category, do not need to label themselves as 'white' or 'heterosexual'. Identity thus 'comes to bear an intrinsic relation to subordination' while 'to be the unmarked or unnamed is to belong to the dominant group'

4

(1998:341). This would explain the silences regarding the dominant categories of the women's identities. The term 'identity' in my question triggered a reflection on those categories linked to subordination rather than to domination.

Joan Cocks comes with the alternative insight that to initially expect those from subordinate groups, like women/feminists to be wholly innocent and always ethical in their behaviour is not a sign of respect but conversely implies that subordinate groups are not complex in their thoughts and wants (in Caraway 1992). Imagining feminists as always moral and correct, as Caraways phrases it, 'serve[s] to flatten out our messiness, gloss over the truly interesting and paradoxical ways we don't get things right in our thoughts, motives, and action (1992:187). This complexity and messiness in thought and action is nicely illustrated in Laura's reflection on her blindness to other categories of subordination that gender: '*When it comes to gender I think I am fairly good, and for me that is a reaction, an immediate reaction, 'ok, there are no women here', (…) but for example with class it is different because I am really comfortable middle-class academic, and I can easily get caught up in discussions and just afterwards realise 'wait a minute, but all the people I talked to they were university students, academics, middle class people' and not having that class consciousness at all in the same way'.* Laura's account resembles the 'race to innocence' that Fellows and Razack describe. Furthermore, her realisation of her relative blindness to other oppressions is comparable to the moment of reflection that prompted Fellows and Razack to write their article in the first place, which was at a conference they organised where someone from a subordinate position challenged the dominant perspective on her circumstances resulting in a heated debate among the delegates and a mutual feeling of being silenced by the other (1998).

While Laura wants and attempts to take notice of other types of marginalisation, she also falls in the 'trap of competing marginalities (Fellows and Razack 1998:339). When I ask her why gender rather than other structures of subordination is at the forefront of her mind, she says: '*First of all I think it is important because I think it is absolutely fundamental to change as a power structure I see that it is more fundamental than other power structures. And it is also, it is very personal, it is a power structure that I relate to personally every day and the difficulties related to it, the way I don't do with…(…) In the gender structure that is where I am in a disadvantaged position, but it is almost the only one, I mean age-wise I am in my 30s, which is a fairly good age to be in, it is better than being 23 for example and of course also it is not that obvious [here], but I know that had I been in Colombia now the fact that I have 2*

5

kids is also is an authority in itself, being middle class, ethnically white, those are all advantaged positions'.

And later in the interview again: '*I am not sure but sometimes I get the feeling that gender in that way is so much more deeply rooted because we are forced to produce and reproduce gender roles all the time, you can find settings that are fairly homogenous in other ways with class or ethnicity (…) But I mean in almost any environment, in each family you have men and women, so you have this constant low intensive reproduction of roles that is really hard to get at because so much of it is perceived as private, still'.* Spelman observed as well that when racism and sexism are discussed and compared, this often culminates in a debate on which of these structures of domination is primary, more basic (1990). The different reasons that are produced to either advocate that racism is more fundamental, or sexism are ultimately irrelevant, as the entire idea of a 'competition' between oppressions is not constructive. Laura as well wavers between an acknowledgement that her own experience of gender oppression might lead her to prioritise gender oppression and an attempt at finding theoretical explanations for gender as a more deeply rooted structure embedded in the private sphere. Laura here might display the 'blindness' that comes with being inside the dominant group in her analysis of class and ethnicity or the anxiety to stress gender oppression as a category that should not be forgotten, two of the reasons that Fellows and Razack quoted for our persistent ignorance of other oppressions despite our theoretical knowledge of those. Laura argues that she is more aware and sensitive to gender oppression than to other oppressions, which she explains through the fact that gender is the only part of her identity where she is in a disadvantaged position. While Ruth Frankenberg on the basis of her interviews with white woman about race concludes that being subjected to one type of marginalisation, e.g. sexism, does not necessarily lead to empathy and awareness of other subordinations, Frankenberg also recognises that 'liberatory movements' could provide some women with 'specific tools' that helped them finding antiracist approaches (1993:20).

Laura is very aware of how her focus on gender in her work and in her private life is linked to her own experience of gender oppression and her relative privilege on other accounts. She says that she '*sometimes do[es] the exercise to translate [her ideas about gender structures] into one of the other power structures*' where she is in the dominant position. She gives the example of how in her work she facilitates sessions on masculinity, which she feels should be compulsory for all boys and men, and that she then realises that her ideas applied to other

power structures, imply that she should also be compelled to participate in sessions on racism. Laura: '*Does that mean that I also think that I should be in groups with white people talking about racism and whiteness and how we reproduce these power structures and of course it does, that would be logical way of dealing with it if I expect that from men then I should also expect that from myself and I don't. And I could always say 'yeah, but I have chosen, I focus on working with gender and feminism' but that is also my easiest choice, that is my disadvantaged position that is also where I have something to gain. For me working with my whiteness it is a lot less rewarding, so of course I am no better than someone else*'

Speaking directly to Laura's acknowledgment of her own false excuse, 'and I could always say, 'yeah, but I have chosen to focus on working with gender and feminism', Fellows and Razack pertinently urge us to ask ourselves the questions 'where have we positioned other women within our strategies for achieving social justice? What do we gain from this positioning?' (1998:352). These questions are particularly urgent in the context of NGO/IGOwork, which has a commitment to forms of social and/or global justice and which naturally at the same time can display blind spots in the lack of acknowledgement of other systems of power. Recognising this hesitation or resistance to fully engage with other political struggles against subordination, they argue that as all structures of subordination are interconnected and interdependent, fighting just one type of marginalisation might give us, as they phrase it 'a toehold on respectability', but never real liberation (1998:350). They draw on examples of subordinated groups dependent for their status on the even lower position of others, e.g. white women with black maids, black maids looking down on prostitutes, to show how complicity in other oppressions served to maintain respectability by drawing boundaries between us and them (1998). The recurrent conflict between our theoretical and political understanding of multiple oppressions and our emotional response to maintain our innocence, points to our anxiety to acknowledge the 'permeability of the boundaries' between us and them (1998:343). While Fellows and Razack's call to attend to other subordinations almost has an instrumental dimension in their argument that only recognising the interconnectedness of the structures of subordination can lead to true liberation (see also Matsuda 1991), other black feminists rather appeal to morality. Lorde, in the aptly called section 'uses of anger', asks: 'What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?' (1984:132). Laura's awareness and questioning of her own privilege

and the acknowledgement of her 'race to innocence', shows however that she is not 'so enamoured of her own oppression' that she shies away from critical self-scrutiny.

Intersectionality

Like Avtar Brah I work under the assumption that 'members of dominant groups do occupy 'privileged' positions within political and material practices that attend these social divisions although the precise interplay of this power in specific institutions or in interpersonal relations cannot be stipulated in advance, may be contradictory, and can be challenged' (1996:112). This implies in the particular case of this research, that while I assume a certain commonality between the women that I interviewed, which is expressed in their identification as women NGO/IGO workers who are located in the global North and work on women/gender issues and have a global orientation in their work, I also seek to pay attention to the internal diversity of this group. Hence, while the focus of this research is not specifically the identity construction of the women NGO/IGO workers through the intersection of different categories like ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, an intersectional approach is indispensable to gain a deeper understanding of some of the complexities regarding their reflections on their work practices and on the relation with the women they seek to support.

Black feminists' assertion that the experiences of black women could only insufficiently be theorised when analyses of 'race' and gender were separated, prompted calls for an approach that would be attentive to the interaction between different categories of subordination. In addition, black feminists sought to challenge the notion of a unified category of 'women' present in Western feminism. Brah and Phoenix define 'intersectionality' as denoting 'the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation –economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential –intersect in historically specific contexts (2004:76). While Brah and Phoenix are careful to use the term 'differentiation' rather than 'discrimination', intersectional approaches have mostly been applied to study and describe the experiences of those that are facing an array of different types of oppression, like black women. However, intersectional approaches can also be applied to groups that do not face multiple axes of discrimination, but rather occupy 'mixed' or advantaged positions (see Yuval-Davis 2006).

Intersectionality has been lauded as 'the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies (…) has made so far (McCall 2005:1771, see also Davis 2008). Despite its popularity however, intersectionality is also notorious for the difficulties in operationalising it for the purpose of empirical research. As Ludvig puts it: 'Its implications for empirical analysis are, on the one hand, a seemingly insurmountable complexity and, on the other, a fixed notion of difference' (2006:246). Davis also recognises the curious combination of the popularity and confusion surrounding intersectionality as an approach, with interpretations varying from intersectionality 'as a crossroad, as 'axes' of difference or as a dynamic process' (Davis 2008:68). The main difficulty in the operationalisation of intersectionality lies, as Ludvig hinted at, in the variety of interpretations of the idea of 'categories'; are categories fixed through the discourses of discrimination, constructed or structural? (see McCall 2005 and Prins 2006). McCall, in a very influential article, distinguishes between 1) the approach of 'anticategorical complexity', which comes out of post-structural approaches that seek to deconstruct categories, 2) 'intracategorical complexity approach' which is the approach typically associated with the studies by black feminists, and 3) the approach 'intercategorical complexity' in which rather than rejecting categories, scholars use, albeit provisionally, the existing dominant categories to analyse relations of domination and oppression (2005). The second approach of intracategorical complexity, which McCall situates between the two other approaches as it neither completely rejects nor strategically uses the categories, is most relevant for the current analysis. Though often associated rather with the study of groups that face multiple oppressions in contrast to this research, one of its other distinguishing features is the focus on one specific social group (hence intracategorical) to get insight in the group members' lived experiences and its complexities.

In my analysis here I want to treat the group of women NGO/IGO workers situated in the global North who work on issues of gender and have a global orientation in their work, as a single, particular group and through an intersectional analysis highlight both the diversity within the group and some of the specific intersections that might influence their work experiences and relations. First, I will focus on the notion of the 'young woman' as an example of how categories of gender and age intersect in the lived experience of some of the NGO/IGO workers, which would be the most classical example of intersectional analysis. Second, it will be discussed how identity categories are attributed different meanings depending on the location and situation. Lastly, I will look at intersectionality in terms of the

relational aspect of identity with reference to the relations of the women NGO/IGO workers with those they seek to support.

Both gender and age were very frequently mentioned as playing a major role in the work experiences of the women NGO/IGO workers; while I expected the significance of the first category, the pertinence of the latter came as a surprise to me. However, I will argue that the specific intersection of the categories of gender and age, produced a specific effect that cannot be theorised by considering both categories separately. Indeed, as Yuval-Davis asserts, the 'point of intersectional analysis is not (…) to reinscribe the additive model of oppression' but to 'analyse the differential ways in which different social divisions are concretely enmeshed and constituted by each other' (2006:205). When I ask Sarah to give me some examples of how her identity plays a role in her work, she tells me what she calls 'an anecdote' of a situation in which she met with a Middle Eastern government official to discuss disarmament. She says that after the first introduction and greetings, *'he said 'so what is this young woman, young lovely woman doing, what can I help you with? We are improving our maternal health programmes, (…) we are really taking care of our young ones' and I looked at him and said 'I think that's great, I am glad that you said that, but no, I am actually here to talk to you the chemical weapons convention'*. While arguably, his statements about the maternal health programmes and 'the young ones' can be read as a response solely to her gender, his form of address 'young lovely woman' points to an image that is coproduced and strengthened through the intersection of sexism and ageism. Being young coupled with being a woman is read as either not very serious and competent –just 'lovely'- while a combination of youth with male could potentially be read as a sign of ambition and strength.

Sonia who works to support women in Africa, relates how in her encounter with those women, she feels that *'they won't not treat you as equals or as colleagues, but you will always be sort of the little girl, the assistant'*. While Sonia makes this statement in her relation to what she perceives as a 'culture of seniority', the image she evokes, is that of a 'little girl'; the figure of youth is immediately gendered. This example very clearly illustrates, similar to what Ludvig observes, that difference, between old and young, male and female, 'cannot be treated as abstracted from power relations' (2006:250). Stacey's complaints about the recurrent and regular sexist behaviour she encounters in her work place flow seamlessly from sexist to ageist behaviour. Stacey: *'At one point there was somebody who thought it was*

appropriate in the mornings to kiss me on the forehead to say hello, as a grandfather with his granddaughter'. In this example age and gender are intertwined to the extent that it is impossible to separate whether gender hierarchies here are expressed through an age-related image of grandfather versus granddaughter or age/seniority power relations through gender. As Stacey emphasises, while her identity deviates from the 'norm' in more than one respect, because of her religion, her ethnicity, and her social class, still '*being a young woman I would say is perhaps the identity that is the hardest to deal with here'*.

However, with Prins I would follow a constructionist rather than a structural approach to intersectionality and stress that rather than understanding the women to be 'passive bearers of the meanings of social categories', processes of subject construction are simultaneously 'subjecting' individuals *and* constituting them as subjects (2006:280). Stacey for example, is not a passive recipient of her identity, but also the agent, which can be shown through the narrative that follows here. Stacey worked previously for a smaller grassroots organisation, while her current large organisation is associated to the UN. She justifies her move to her current organisation, against which she initially had and continues to have significant reservations, by referring to her realisation that '*I d[id] not have the position even to represent the groups I was working with to go to the government; certainly not as a young woman, certainly not as young brown woman in certain contexts'*. She observes that working for the international organisation she now works for '*it is no longer the challenge of being the brown girl'*. Stacey: '*So I mean, that is the wonderful thing about working in an international organisation,that everyone is from everywhere else. But that does not mean that there are not assumptions about my identity, there are assumptions that automatically brown means Indian, brown can usually never mean [where I come from or where my parents come from]'*. This Foucauldian reading of identity categories as constitutive and oppressive means as Haraway expresses it, 'To be a subject with a sense of self in *complex complicity* with and *resistance to* the matrix of forces that made one possible' (quoted in Caraway 1992:2). Similarly, Stacey's move can be both interpreted as 'complex complicity with' and 'resistance to' the identity structures that shape her.

Hence, while the intersecting identity categories have real material consequences for the lived experiences and are shaped by structural forms of discrimination, the intersecting categories take on their specific meaning within particular locations and times. This implies moreover, that the meaning of categories shifts according to the context in which they are interpreted.

Thus, it is important that Brah and Phoenix in their above quoted definition of intersectionality stress the intersection of categories 'in historically specific contexts' ((2004:76). Stacey's brown skin is 'read' differently and took on different meanings depending on the context she is positioned in. Sara Ahmed uses an autobiographical narrative to illustrate the multiple shifting of readings of her body in an encounter she had as a 14 year old in Australia with the police (1997). In their short encounter, her bare feet combined with her brown skin are first read as a deviant Aboriginal and hence as a threat to the safety of the neighbourhood, while later when she tells them which school she goes to, her body is interpreted as belonging to a middle-class white girl with a sexy sun tan; both interpretations do not do justice to her 'real' origin (Ibid.). As Ahmed asserts elsewhere, black feminists in their work have drawn attention 'to the processes of identification which produce contradictory and unstable subject positions, where subjects are *addressed or 'hailed' in many different ways* (Ahmed 2000: 112, emphasis added).

Pauline's description of her experience as a woman working in Bangladesh shows the shifting of the reading of her gender: *I was interacting and socially interacting and professionally interacting, apart from the interviews, with men (…) and that was quite difficult, really. Because I knew that had I been a Bangladeshi woman I would have been eating dinner with the women there, but because I was a white woman who had come to visit, I was granted a special kind of status like an honorary man basically and I was eating with the men and interacting with the men and it was quite uncomfortable I think on both sides, because they are not used to interacting in a public gathering with women and obviously there is issues of power and things like that'*. Pauline's whiteness, in this situation, seems to take precedence over her gender in that her whiteness makes her categorised as on equal level with the Bangladeshi men. Pauline's story is similar to that identified by Barbara Heron, who also uses the same term 'honorary men' to describe how whiteness served to overwrite the gender of women Canadian development workers in Africa and endowed them with a status normally not bestowed on non-white women (Heron 2007).

Yuval-Davis provides a subtle account of the nature of social divisions as articulated both at the macro level through institutions and at the level of the lived experiences of people through power relations, inclusion and exclusions (2006). She stresses: 'Importantly, this included not only what they think about themselves and their communities but also their attitudes and prejudices towards others (2006:198). Building on Pauline's account of her

changed status as 'honorary man', I now want to turn to that intersubjective element of the intersectionality of social divisions, or, in other words, to the way identities are understood within relationships and through relationships. It is important to note that while my research concentrates on those women NGO/IGO workers that are located in the global North and the relative privilege they are endowed with through their roles and their locations, it should not be assumed that all the interviewees were born or their parents born in those countries that are associated with the prosperous West. Hence, the relationship between those women NGO/IGO workers with an immigrant background with the women they supported follows more complex patterns of simultaneous identification and differentiation.

Kim, who has an immigrant background herself and now works with immigrants, notices: '*there are so many paths, sequences of integration, that I see there are people that really assimilate to the point that people that stay like they are in their culture and try to survive somehow with this and [then] something in the middle'*. When I subsequently ask her whether the fact that she and her family made a choice for a certain model of integration has consequences for who she identifies with more in her work, she says: '*Ehm, no, because as I am born [here] at one point it was clear my life is here (…), maybe I miss it a bit too that I have nothing from the culture from my parents, I miss this part and I think sometimes I like to see that people can manage to handle both of it, because I have the feeling I did not handle both [cultures], I just adopted one. (…) It was maybe easier to integrate, it was easier for me to adapt to the language because I had no choice, with whom should I speak a different language?* Kim's experience of her own assimilation makes her respectful of those who manage to straddle two different cultures. She rejects my idea that she would more readily identify with those immigrants that have chosen the same path of assimilation and thereby seems to say that rather than the identification being determined by the eventual choice of the form of integration, it is the dilemma of how to bridge (or not bridge) different cultures that she recognizes.

Fay shares the same immigrant background with some of the women she supports. The women Fay supports are in a very marginalised position and hence the recognition of sharing the same national background with those women has a very different effect from meeting another compatriot at work conferences, which '*would be very light and it would be, what are all the opportunities that we have, look at what we have here!*'. However, when she meets marginalised women that she supports through her work who are from her country the

encounter is very different. Fay: '*She is relating her story to me and I understand because there are a lot of structural and other barriers, first there was the [political] system, you could not leave your country and then you have European migratory restrictions you cannot enter the country. Yes, it is women my age who want to travel, they want to have jobs, they want to do something and there are just (…) no opportunities, and this generates an anger also [in me] and even more so if then they tell me of experiences that they have had of discrimination here, because it is a discriminating and racist society. And you are aware that you are living in the same society and some experiences you have also had and you share and others not because you are privileged in some way. Then there is the question, how do you look at them and at yourself? And at the beginning it was difficult for me because I felt guilty also for having had, or for having certain privileges because I thought the starting point was the same for us and why is it possible for me to be here and for here to be here?*'.

Fay experiences in this encounter both identification of commonalities and differentiation through what she calls 'her privileges'. This narrative underlines once more that while our analysis should pay attention to the structural barriers shaping people's lives, categories of identity, like nationality and gender should not be read as determining universally the experiences of people. Or, in the words of Sotelo, 'political and economic transformations may set the stage for migration, but they do not write the script' (quoted in: McCall 2005:1782: ftn 15). Fay's narrative of her encounter illustrates the relational aspect of her positionality as a woman NGO/IGO worker with an immigrant background. As Brah and Phoenix point out, 'recognition of the importance of intersectionality has impelled new ways of thinking about complexity and multiplicity in power relations *as well as emotional investments'* (italics added 2004:82). Fay's narrative serves as a reminder how an intersectional analysis should 1) combine the macrostructures of social division with the microstructure of subjective experiences and relationships 2) explore how the specific way categories interact without reifying the categories nor disavowing them 3) move away from a determinist additive model of oppression or domination and 4) situate the narratives in their historical context and location and, finally 5) analyse the relational aspect of identity.

Conclusion

Western feminism has been challenged for assuming universality and shared sisterhood in the experiences of women while basing itself on the situation of white, middle-class women. The assumption of sisterhood as shared victimhood has been linked to what Fellows and Razack

call, the 'race to innocence'. The 'race to innocence' both encompasses the belief that gender oppression is the most fundamental oppression and the refusal for critical self-scrutiny in relation to how feminists are implicated in other structures of subordination. I have argued that this 'race to innocence' can indeed be encountered in the reflections of women NGO/IGO workers on the relation between their identity and their work practices. The critique of black feminists that their lived experiences of discrimination were not sufficiently theorised in Western feminist analysis prompted the introduction of 'intersectionality' as an approach that could explore how different social divisions interacted. While intersectional analysis is often deployed to analyse the position of those most marginalised, I have argued here that an intersectional approach can be used to illuminate the diversity and complexity of the experiences of women NGO/IGO workers located in the global North. In my analysis I have initially concentrated on how the categories of gender and age intersect in the experiences of some women NGO/IGO workers. Subsequently, I have attempted to show how intersectional analysis needs to be situated in time and space and in relation to others in order to do justice to the shifting of categories according to location. This analysis challenges simplistic assumptions regarding women NGO/IGO workers located in the global North and stresses the need for attentiveness to the complexity of their interactions.

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. (1997) 'It's a sun-tan, isn't it? Auto-biography as an Identificatory practice' in: *Black British Feminism,* (ed. H. S. Mirza). London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 153-167

Ahmed, S. (2000) 'Introduction: Boundaries and Connections' in: *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism* (ed. M. McNeil). Florence: Routledge

Brah, A. (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge

Brah, Avtar and Phoenix, Ann. (2004) "Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality" in *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5(3): 75-86.

Caraway, N. (1992) *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism.* Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press

Carby, H.V (1992) 'White woman listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' in: *The Empire strikes back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (ed. by Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). London: Routledge

Crenshaw, K (2000) 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' in James, J. and Sharpley-Whiting, T. (eds) *The Black Feminist Reader*. Massachussetts, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Davis, K. (2008) 'Intersectionality as a buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes Feminist Theory Succesful' in: *Feminist Theory*, vol. 9, 1, pp. 67-85, Sage Publications

Denis, Ann (2008) 'Intersectional Analysis: A contribution of feminism to sociology' in International Sociology, 23(5): 677-694.

Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering Development: the Making and Unmaking of the Third World* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press

Fellows, M. L. and S. Razack (1998) 'The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women' in: *The Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, 1997-1998, 1, pp. 335-352

Frankenberg, R. (1993) *White Women, Race Matter: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Heron, B. (2007) *Desire for Development: Whiteness, Gender and the Helping Imperative*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press

hooks, b. (1981) *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* Boston: South End Press

hooks, b. (1986) 'Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women' in: *Feminist Review*, no.23, June 1986

hooks, b. (2000) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* London: Pluto Press

Lazreg, M. (2000) 'The triumphant discourse of global feminism: should other women be known?' In: *Going Global: the Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*. (Ed. A Amireh and L Suhair Majaj). New York Garland Publishing

Lorde, A (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* Trumansburg, NY : Crossing Press

Ludvig, A. (2006) 'Differences between Women? Intersecting Voices in a Female Narrative' in: *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol, 13, 3, pp. 245-258

Kothari, U. (2005) 'Authority and Expertise: The Professionalisation of International Development and the Ordering of Dissent' in: *Antipode*, Volume 37, Number 3, June 2005, pp. 425-446

Morgan, R. (1996) *Sisterhood is global: the international women's movement anthology* New York: Feminist Press

Prins, B. (2006) 'Narrative Accounts of Origins: A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach?' in: *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 13, 3, pp. 277-290

Shiva, V. (1989) *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. London: Zed Books

Spelman, E. V. (1990) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* London: The Women's Press Limited

Stirrat, R.L and H. Henkel (1997) 'The Development Gift: The Problem of Reciprocity in the NGO World', in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 554, The Role of NGOs Charity and Empowerment, Nov 1997, pp. 66-80

Yuval-Davis, Nira (2006) 'Intersectionality and Feminist Politics' in *European Journal of Women's Studies* 13(3), 193-209 (16 p)