Intersections of Identity in Civil Society:

Case Studies in Policy and Planning

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ABSTRACT

Minelle Mahtani encourages governmental as well as non-governmental organizations to pay particular attention not only to intersections of diversity, but to how they manage these intersections. With the help of case-studies, she demonstrates both the complexity of intersections of diversity and of the strategies to address intersectional discrimination. Significantly, Mahtani recognizes the effect of increasingly used international networks on the analysis of multiple and shifting identities.

The not-for-profit perspective

Attention to issues around diversity intersections is absolutely essential and relevant to the long-term success of any not-for-profit in Canada. It is crucial that we recognize not only the changing demographics of our organizations across the country, but that we also consider the complexities of a changing work environment that relies on international networks, knowledge-based service, and cross-cultural communication. How do changes in demographics affect our day-to-day workplaces, our programs and our policies? How might we negotiate and develop infrastructures that address these changes?

My work at the not-for-profit IMPACS, the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, has emphasized the importance of such long-term strategies. IMPACS is a Canadian charitable organization committed to the protection and expansion of democracy and to the strengthening of civil society. We are based in Vancouver, with offices in Toronto. We are continually asking ourselves how we can best address issues of diversity intersections through our projects. Simply put, our mandate is to turn up the volume on civil society. We do so through our charities and democracy program, our communications centre, where we have worked on hundreds of marketing and strategic planning campaigns for other not-for-profits, and our international media program. As we go about developing our projects, we continually ask ourselves and our clients how we might more fully understand how intersections of identity – those of race, class and gender, but also age, sexual orientation, culture, religion, and ethnicity, among a myriad of other identity aspects – are explored, understood and negotiated.

Through our work with a variety of not-for-profits nationally and internationally, as well as networks and government policymakers, we have learned to value intersectional analyses that consider the lived experiences of people affected by shifting aspects of identity. As such, we attempt to ensure that our practices do not disadvantage members of any diverse group. In order to understand how intersections of identity are understood and negotiated, we recognize the complexity of how people experience marginalization through identity intersections.

Intersectional marginalization arises out of the combination of various oppressions. This is dramatically unique and different from any one form of discrimination alone. Such an approach acknowledges the complexity of the experience of marginalization and focuses on society's response to and perception of the individual. This does not necessitate the individual "fitting into" a static category of identity. It acknowledges the experience of multiple, fluid and flexible forms of identities that emerge out of the experience of diverse identity intersections. For example, the experience of a woman of Indian-Iranian identity is markedly different from that of not only a white woman, but also that of an Indian woman and an Iranian woman. It is a unique and different experience when these identities are combined. It is equally as important to remember that multiple axes of identity are always grounded and lived; we can only ever hope to understand the experience of multiple identities as a series of momentary snapshots played out on the social landscape. The ground upon which multiple identities are lived is always shifting and changing. We need to consider the very unstable nature of those spaces and how they affect the experience and the perception of those shifting identities.

In this brief paper, I will share three examples of case studies, where the IMPACS team has faced and continues to face the challenges of unraveling and understanding complex intersections of identity in policy, practice and implementation. The first is our project on media, gender and identity.

Case Study One: Media, Gender and Identity in Transnational Newsrooms

Challenge: How can we understand how multiple forms of discrimination operate in newsrooms around the world?

As a professor of Media and Cultural Studies, and as a member of the strategic counsel team, I initially set forth on a project to understand, broadly, how gender works in various newsrooms around the world. This project was inspired by my own experiences as a national television news producer. It is clear that the demographics of Canadian newsrooms are changing dramatically. As statistics from the CBC demonstrate, almost half of the people employed by Canada's largest broadcaster are women (CBC 2002) and this is not isolated to Canada; indeed, similar patterns are emerging in a variety of countries. Women are also increasingly moving into positions of power in the field of journalism - women who were editorial assistants ten years ago are now becoming executive producers of key programs.

As the cultural demographics of the country change, broadcasters have an obligation to cover the news in ways that are relevant to their increasingly multicultural audiences. Such attempts to provide balanced and accurate reports serve to puncture stereotypes, and also attract new viewers, creating community dialogue, and increasing credibility. But how might we take into consideration how race and gender work together to create complex and complicit forms of subordination and domination in the newsroom? And how might these processes affect programming choices?

In my research, it became increasingly clear that it would be impossible to analyze gender without also considering race. Although we are indeed witnessing a surge in the number of women entering into positions of power in the media, women of colour remain marginalized and excluded from management positions. This was a recurring problem that emerged in interviews in Canada, but also in interviews in Australia, New Zealand, and India as well. One interview with a woman I will call Serafina, a twenty-five year old black Canadian television news researcher, aptly identified the challenges facing management in their attempts to create a more diverse workplace:

"All I can say is that the sexism in the newsroom was manageable. The racism was not. We still have to fight the image that we're nothing more than 'unqualified tokens' who were hired because of our skin colour. There's a lot of work that still has to be done."

As Agnew (1998) reminds us, feminists can easily become complicit in the subordination of others – especially other women. Stereotypes arising from particular combination of race and gender can be the source of discriminatory treatment. Indeed, such comments are not merely relegated to newsroom dynamics. Diversity initiatives implemented in a variety of workplaces reflect similar sentiments. While many companies and corporations realize that discrimination can occur at multiple levels, developing remedies remain challenging. Such results in interviews have led us to consider diverse strategies in policy and practice. How do we create programs that work to provide support to women of colour in newsrooms? We are investigating options that include mentoring programs and diversity training that serves to underscore how identity intersections play out in the newsroom.

However, it is crucial to take into consideration the multiple forms of identity intersections before, during, and after the project. An important issue has been unveiling and continually remarking upon our own Eurocentric practices in our train the trainer models. For example, how do we train our trainers before they go to Afghanistan? How do we evaluate who is an appropriate trainer? How do we judge the success of our programs?

Case study two: International Media

Challenge: How do we foster free, critical and effective media by helping local media outlets and journalism schools provide basic reporting skills in places where media have a history of using their power to promote violence?

IMPACS has been involved in a variety of projects internationally that work to provide technical capacity to women's groups to support the development of women's media. We also help civil society groups in Afghanistan implement their own free-media initiatives and decrease the power of regional warlords by empowering a civil society governed by democratic structures. Our goal is to enhance women's capacity and encourage their participation in the reconstitution of society. As such, we work in partnership with the Afghan's Women Network (AWN) and other groups. We also helped develop the Women's Media and Law Association (a one-year training program) to build the capacity of women in Afghanistan to broadcast programs that will address issues of concern for women around the country.

However, it is crucial to take into consideration the multiple forms of identity intersections before, during, and after the project. An important issue has been unveiling and continually remarking upon our own Eurocentric practices in our train the trainer models. For example, how do we train our trainers before they go to Afghanistan? How do we evaluate who is an appropriate trainer? How do we judge the success of our programs? To begin with, we insist on intensive language training and pay specific attention to issues around cultural sensitivity that not only consider, but also

interrogate, the unstable nature of identity categories. For example, it is not enough simply to send a woman to Afghanistan, assuming that they will be "sisters" and experience a shared sense of subjectivity and solidarity. Such a naive view only works to jeopardize our programs. Gender is obviously significant, while race, religion, and culture also have a significant role to play. It is important for us to consider the relationships between women of various identities who may seem to share commonalities on the surface. For example, simply ensuring that we send a Muslim woman trainer is fraught with complexities. Muslims may appear to be a single, monolithic group, but there are significant differences within this broad category of identity. For example, how might a Shi'a Muslim woman trainer from Canada be perceived by a Muslim Sunni Afghan woman? What tensions might arise in that relationship? Even within rubrics of race, gender, and class categories, there remain significant differences that must be considered and interrogated. We are continually asking ourselves how we can pay attention to all aspects of these diverse intersections without displacing others. We maintain the importance of ensuring that the process – from start to finish – is always transparent. This transparency is absolutely essential to the success of any project.

Case study three: Violence Against Women toolkits

Challenge: How do we develop a media toolkit that will provide communication advice to a wide range of women's centres?

We are currently involved in a project that attempts to develop a communications toolkit for a wide variety of women's centres in one province. The tookit will include tips on acquiring interviews with journalists, key messages, how to write a press release, lobbying tips, etc. The toolkit will provide methods to challenge stereotypical representations of violence against women in the media. Our challenge is to offer a toolkit that will work for a large majority of centres.

Our initial response was to first identify what the challenges are to centres outside of the urban areas. Rural differences, class differences, not to mention race, class, and cultural differences all represent salient factors in the development, production and consumption of the toolkit. We discovered that regional differences, and most significantly, a lack of resources in rural areas especially after debilitating government cutbacks, play an important role in the experience of marginalization for women, especially among differently-abled women and immigrant women. We also recognized the need to consider how Aboriginal sex workers experience marginalization very differently from white women. Their experience of a double marginalization has made us re-consider media approaches, especially in light of the Pickton case and the horrific media coverage that will continue to take center-stage during the trial. What might we do to ensure that Aboriginal women are not further marginalized during this trial, for example?

Mapping the geographies of identity intersections

There remains a paucity of information available about how intersections of identity are understood and negotiated in policy and practice. These brief studies raise more questions than they provide answers. We remain committed to our goal to ensure that our practices do not serve to disadvantage members of any one group while aiding in the empowerment of another. This requires an honest, open dialogue and a constant re-evaluation on all our parts. It can mean, at times, refusing to take on certain projects. It also means keeping the process transparent. At IMPACS, we emphasize a context-specific approach to understand how identity intersections are negotiated. It is imperative to consider how others perceive identity and the shifting ground upon which identity is constructed. I recommend that we continue to map out how identity intersections play out in the social landscape to provide us with a more nuanced picture of these complex processes of identity formation.

References

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