



**OXFAM INTERSECTIONALITY SERIES**

# YOUR STRUGGLE IS MY STRUGGLE

INTEGRATING INTERSECTIONALITY IN WORK WITH  
LESBIAN WOMEN, BISEXUAL WOMEN AND TRANS-  
WOMEN IN ZIMBABWE

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**OXFAM**

**COVER:** *VOVO members dance in the streets of Bulawayo, t-shirts emblazoned with the message: 'Women who are not afraid to use the F-word - FEMINISM'.*

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# FOREWORD

On March 23-24, 2015, representatives from Oxfam affiliates and partners assembled on the Simmons College campus in Boston, Massachusetts. In a rare opportunity, gender experts and development practitioners donned their student hats to deep-dive into the topic of Intersectionality, an area of academic thought and feminist theory that is evolving into an ever-growing body of development discourse. The event was co-sponsored by Oxfam America, Oxfam Novib, and Oxfam Intermon, in close partnership with the Center for Gender in Organizations at the Simmons School of Management.

Not just a learning space, the Symposium was also a conduit for the generation of knowledge. The centerpiece of discussions was a series of practice papers, authored by Oxfam staff and partners, which explore the issue of Gender and Intersectionality within the broader context of international development work. The intention is to share Oxfam's experience in Gender and Intersectionality with a wide audience in hopes of fostering thoughtful debate and discussion.

Oxfam America extends special thanks to all staff and partners who participated in the Symposium and who shared their expertise through these practice papers. We acknowledge the contribution of the advisory and planning committees, particularly of Sandra Sotelo Reyes (Intermon), Carmen Reinoso (Novib), Muthoni Muriu (Oxfam America), Patricia Deyton (CGO), Alivelu Ramisetty (Oxfam America), Maria Ezpeleta (Oxfam America), Eloisa Devietti (Oxfam America) and Lauren Walleser (CGO). We also recognize the support of Caroline Sweetman and Liz Cooke (Oxfam Great Britain) who made possible the publication of a special virtual issue of *Gender & Development, Intersecting Inequalities*, (<http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/bes/cgde-vsi-intersectionality>). Finally, we thank Irene Munoz (Oxfam International) and Aileen Charleston (Oxfam America) for their collaboration on communications.

Intersectionality is a feminist theory and analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. The experiences of marginalization and privilege are not only defined by gender, but by other identity factors, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, to name a few – all of which are determined, shaped by, and imbedded in social systems of power.

## INTERSECTIONALITY PRACTICE PAPERS SERIES

- *Active Citizenship of Women and Youth in Nicaragua*, Damarius Ruiz and Carolina Egio Artal (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Building Gender-Sensitive Resilience through Women's Economic Empowerment: Lessons learned from pastoralist women in Ethiopia*, Imma Guixe (Oxfam Intermon)
- *Re-politicizing Intersectionality: How an intersectional perspective can help INGOs be better allies to women's rights movements*, Jenny Enarsson (Oxfam Great Britain)
- *Women's Economic Empowerment and Domestic Violence: Links and lessons for Practitioners working with intersectional approaches*, Mara Bolis (Oxfam America), Christine Hughes (Oxfam Canada), Rebecca Fries (Value for Women), and Stephanie Finigan (Prosperity Catalyst)
- *"Your struggle is my struggle": Integrating intersectionality in work with lesbian women, bisexual women and trans-women in Zimbabwe*, Sian Maseko (Oxfam Zimbabwe) and Sammantha Ndlovu (Sexual Rights Centre)

*All papers are available as downloadable PDFs on our websites, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/> and <http://policy-practice.oxfamamerica.org/>, and may be distributed and cited with proper attribution.*

# INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the work of Voice of the Voiceless (VOVO), a civil society organisation based in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and development partner of Oxfam. VOVO is working to integrate intersectionality in its work with lesbian women, bisexual women and trans-women (LBT). This work highlights the importance of using intersectional awareness to build bridges and form alliances in an effort to challenge the status quo in a country marred by a serious erosion of women's rights. However, the lessons learned from this experience challenge the conjuncture of identity politics and intersectionality, which is both essential yet problematic.

# FINDINGS

## National Context

*“I am a fourth class citizen in Zimbabwe – I am black, a woman, a lesbian and an Ndebele.”*

This statement sums up the experience for many women in Zimbabwe: the experience of isolation, exclusion and “othering.” In a country facing a human rights crisis that has lasted more than fifteen years, divisions and polarisation have become the characteristics of much of society. As the factionalism within the ruling party is played out (very publicly) around identity, so society is equally divided. Statements of “you are either with us or against us” fill the public media as declarations from the highest echelons of Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), the ruling party, sending a clear message that opposition will not be tolerated, but neither will diversity or difference.

The history of Zimbabwe is controversial and contested.<sup>1</sup> Zimbabweans joke that the only people who really know Zimbabwe are those who say they don't understand Zimbabwe! Zimbabwe is a complex country with a colonial history of repression and segregation. A long and bloody independence struggle liberated the country from the British in 1980. The post-independence period was marred by violence including the infamous Gukurahundi massacre<sup>2</sup> by which the ZANU-PF government attacked alleged dissidents, many of whom were Ndebele and members of ZAPU. This conflict lasted from 1983 until 1987<sup>3</sup> and deeply scarred the country, creating tribal divisions from which Zimbabwe has yet to heal. Now under the longest-standing President in Africa, Zimbabwe has experienced a serious and devastating economic decline, a breakdown of the rule of law and serious human rights violations.

As happened in many post-colonial contexts, the Nationalist discourse was extremely powerful and premised on the image of an “homogenous” black Zimbabwean, often male, whose first identity was being black. This was an important discourse and critical for nation-building. However, the repercussions for Zimbabwe were serious and long-term. An ideal Zimbabwean was created and those who deviated from that ideal were punished. Deviation came at a high cost.

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to provide a brief overview to illustrate some of the points of exclusion that VOVO seeks to challenge.

<sup>2</sup> From the Shona expression for “*the early rain which washes away the chaff*.”

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Commission

Following the Unity Accord that ended the killings in 1987, Zimbabwe settled into an unsettling peace. The late '90s and early 2000s showed the cracks out of which was to emerge a new wave of political opposition in the form of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The political climate in Zimbabwe started to shift, and the government responded with the re-introduction of oppressive colonial laws<sup>4</sup> that clamped down on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, to name but a few. The government was now firmly pitted against its citizens.

This crackdown on civil and political rights was paralleled by the dramatic erosion of women's rights, along with the steady deterioration of public services and the closing of safe spaces. The rise of religious fundamentalism, a trend noted internationally<sup>5</sup>, resulted in a gradual and serious backlash on women's rights and the gains made for women over the last two decades since the Beijing Platform for Action. Women were now constantly at risk, most particularly those living on the margins. As the crisis in Zimbabwe deepened, many individuals and communities were further marginalised and excluded. But from this chaos and crisis have emerged some crucial and critical voices that in a small way – and for now – have served to change the face of activism and civil society in Zimbabwe.

### **VOVO's Analysis:**

Voice of the Voiceless (VOVO) is a feminist collective led by and for lesbian, bisexual and transgendered women and individuals (LBT). VOVO emerged in response to the overt patriarchal, heteronormative<sup>6</sup> and gender normative<sup>7</sup> social structures that are the foundation of society. VOVO members felt that even within the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) spaces in Zimbabwe, the voice of women and trans persons was ignored and invisible. The obvious and central focus of the LGBT struggle has often been around removing sodomy laws<sup>8</sup>, which has resulted in the dominance of male voices and experiences. This has been exacerbated by funding patterns, which have tended to use HIV as an entry point to key populations, mainly gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM), often to the detriment of the broader human rights struggle and (unintentionally) reaffirming stigma and the exclusion of women.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.zlhr.org.zw/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11:human-rights-defenders-project&catid=2:our-programmes&Itemid=43](http://www.zlhr.org.zw/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11:human-rights-defenders-project&catid=2:our-programmes&Itemid=43)

<sup>5</sup> Horn, Jessica. *Not as Simple as ABC: Christian Fundamentalism and HIV and AIDS responses in Africa*. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Heteronormativity is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, especially in contexts where individuals or groups are not taking up alternative identities or talking openly about same-sex sexuality in their own lives and communities.

<sup>7</sup> Gender normativity is the assumption that people are either only male or female and that men are typically masculine and women typically feminine.

<sup>8</sup> UNDP. *The Global Commission on HIV and the Law: The Global Commission on HIV and the Law - risks, rights and health*. Group, Bureau for Development Policy; 2012.

In response to this assessment, VOVO defined some very basic ambitions. VOVO wanted to give women a voice; provide a safe space; challenge the root causes of discrimination; and affirm the visibility of LBT women and individuals in the LGBT and the broader women's movements.

VOVO's power analysis<sup>9</sup> recognizes that challenging power is the only way to make change happen. However, VOVO recognised that advancing a feminist agenda and challenging entrenched inequalities and exclusions could not focus on the State, the "visible power,"<sup>10</sup> alone. This visible power, characterised by homophobia and misogyny justified by a moralistic and religious fervour, demonstrated by the country's leadership, should not be VOVO's focus. The reason for this was simple - the harder to measure and harder to challenge "invisible power"<sup>11</sup> that creates and reaffirms social and gendered norms is at the heart of a system that subordinates women, denies women's agency and seeks to make them powerless.

One approach to interrogating the invisible power in society is to use the feminist lens of intersectionality, and one of the most powerful tools in exploring this issue is Rubin's sexual hierarchy model.<sup>12</sup> VOVO adapted this tool to help its members better understand the dominant features of Zimbabwean society and the invisible power that excludes and marginalises individuals, groups, communities etc. based on identity. In making this strategic choice, VOVO members set themselves the challenge of deconstructing issues of identity (and *perceived* identity) and how these serve as the basis for exclusion from many spaces in society. This tool created an entry point about how to make the concept of intersectionality, a practical application.

A critical component of the relationship between VOVO and Oxfam concerns how concepts and theory can become a development tool to advance social justice and equality. Rubin's sexual hierarchy provides a conceptual entry point, but the challenge is to integrate intersectionality as a lens in the analysis of power and inequality. One of the essential elements rests in the process, in other words, in how the work is undertaken between Oxfam and VOVO and between VOVO and their communities. Meaningful participation is only possible if intersectionality is understood and the impact of multiple discriminations recognised and affirmed in the work with individuals and groups.

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<sup>9</sup> Now integrated into the Oxfam Country Strategy for Zimbabwe

<sup>10</sup> Just Associates. *Feminist Movement Builders' Dictionary*. Just Associates, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Rubin, Gayle. *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader (A John Hope Franklin Centre Book)*. Duke University Press, 2011.

## Your struggle is my struggle

Members of VOVO recognised that they could not challenge their more overt exclusion on the basis of sexual orientation without first acknowledging their exclusion on the basis of other elements of identity or perceived identity. These included tribal identity, linguistic, geographic location, class, etc.

This appreciation prompted VOVO to bring together activists working in a range of fields (socio-economic rights, disability rights, sex workers rights, civil and political rights) to identify shared interests upon which a broader movement about humanity and human dignity could possibly be built. This approach was rooted in VOVO's belief that solidarity is created when women are able to see beyond the identities that separate them. Thus the banner that arches over all the dialogue sessions with other women reads: "Your struggle is my struggle."

The symposium that brought these activists together launched a number of critical conversations about exclusions within the women's movement. There were extensive conversations about the fact the women's movement in Zimbabwe has focused on a particular type – or "ideal" - of woman. Issues such as disability are seen as secondary or "add-ons," while issues of sexual orientation are completely ignored. The sex worker community (the vast majority of whom are women) has no voice in the women's movement.

These exclusions have meant:

1. A denial of women's agency. If disability is treated as an add-on, this serves to reinforce the idea of women as victims, not of women with agency. There is a failure to recognise that normative notions around gender and sexuality influence disability and women living with disabilities are assumed never to have a "normative" sexuality.
2. The stereotypes and norms that we seek to challenge are often reaffirmed in our own heteronormative assumptions, for example, with regards to violence against women.<sup>13</sup> We need to be norm-critical and to create new norms.
3. We are not the same, but we are all equal. In homogenising the women's movement we are forgetting the diverse, rich and important experiences of many women in Zimbabwe.
4. The policing of women's bodies in Zimbabwe is an issue that affects all women and we should not allow ourselves to be divided and weakened because of differences that we do not understand.

Through this process, Oxfam has played a critical role providing safe spaces and supporting the process of building togetherness as well as the outcome. These spaces have enabled participants to determine how best to challenge power and

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<sup>13</sup> Violence against women is still framed heteronormatively as an understanding of violence against women perpetrated by men. As a result the experience of women in intimate relationships with women is further stigmatized and silenced.

advocate for equality and equity. It has also provided an opportunity to confront stigma and discrimination across movements. We should not assume that people living on the margins of society should be natural allies based on their marginalisation, but VOVO and Oxfam believe that this social marginalisation offers potential for solidarity and collective action,

### **But you must have an identity!**

Identity politics are complex and must be problematised if they are to be applied as an organising strategy for social change. This is particularly important for the LGBT community, where gender identities can be complex, ambiguous and not well understood. The “alphabet soup,” as it is often referred to, that seeks to encapsulate so many different identities is a constantly shifting construct.

One of VOVO’s projects is an on-going exercise to translate concepts and terms into their mother language, acknowledging the power of language and seeking to reclaim these identities rather than rely on borrowed or foreign terms. We need to recognise *“the reductive and simplistic nature of identity categories and explore in the context of the programme or community how these identities work and understand in more depth the complexities of sexualities and gender identities in any specific context.”*<sup>14</sup>

An effective application of an intersectional approach must enable participants to challenge norms that insist on an identity to create “validity.” Identity is a fluid concept. The premise of VOVO’s work is that the identity that people choose should be the cornerstone of the work of the collective. Freedom to choose an identity is fundamental, no “identity” should be imposed and we must recognise that identity is not absolute or fixed. This is a challenging task, but it is the foundation of safe spaces. If individuals do not feel obliged to take a label that does not reflect their identity either linguistically, conceptually or contextually, then the platform is one of trust, openness and honesty. As a feminist collective, these are the critical components for movement-building.

VOVO’s recognition of the problems of fixed or assumed identities is also rooted in the understanding that in Zimbabwe this is both a class and urban issue. VOVO acknowledges that this is an issue that it needs to address more comprehensively. The importance of local knowledge in understanding sexuality, sexual expression, gender identity and gender expression is essential if the collective is going to be representative and inclusive. Indeed, “the emphasis on the category “lesbian” can also produce the rejection of local sexual categories and therefore local knowledge and choices.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Boyce, H. L. (2012) in “Understanding Global Sexualities: New Frontiers”, edited by P. Aggleton, P. Boyce, H. L. Moore and R. Parker, London: Routledge

<sup>15</sup> Williams (2012) in “Understanding Global Sexualities: New Frontiers”, edited by P. Aggleton, P. Boyce, H. L. Moore and R. Parker, London: Routledge

It must be clear that a desire to ensure that the rights of lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons are an integral component of the women's movement and human rights movements in Zimbabwe does in no way dilute the importance of the struggle for LGBT rights. On the contrary the struggle for sexual rights demonstrates that sexuality and sexual rights are integral to human rights and should not be isolated or assumed to be issues for minority groups. As the discussion about identity politics has demonstrated it may be time to reconsider how we frame issues of sexuality and sexual rights.

# CONCLUSION

The critical lesson in this work for both Oxfam and VOVO is the importance of the marginalised community voice. However, the “community” can also reinforce negative divisions and stigma, but the participatory processes allowed a safe space to challenge those discriminations and start to build movements not based on sameness, but based on a celebration of diversity and inclusivity. International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) in Bulawayo brought together numerous activists to share stories and experiences of phobia and exclusion in recognition of the shared experiences of the damage being done by hate speech and homophobia in the country.

Oxfam has much to learn from our partners about how to most effectively challenge power and privilege. As a leading humanitarian and development organisation, we need to understand that applying an intersectional lens is critical to ensure we do not reinforce the exclusions already faced by many women. We need to constantly ensure that our work emphasises agency and does not create a list of vulnerable groups that causes fragmentation and division.

In applying an intersectional lens, we must also ensure that bodily integrity and autonomy are foundational.

However, as we deepen our understanding of rights-based work, we also need to consider more norm-critical approaches that are not so dependent upon identities and seek instead to challenge those labels that threaten to marginalise women in the margins even further.



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