



The Most Vulnerable

An Intersectional Approach to Refugee Policy & Advocacy

April 2019

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Introduction

Policy-making and advocacy have always gone hand in hand. They exist together in a cycle where governments are meant to develop policies based on the needs of their constituents. However, those needs are often left unmet due to limitations in the policy development process and as a result, civil society is required to advocate for reform. Given this continual pattern, something must be done to create more effective policies in the first place. To begin with, there must be an acknowledgement that, in many instances, policy-makers are responsible for developing policies that largely do not directly affect them. In order to address the varying ways policies affect different people, it is necessary to incorporate diverse voices and broad consultation that have a meaningful impact on the policy development process. Without this, policies are created as one-size-fits-all solutions, thus rendering them ineffective. This report examines how the federal Government, Churches, and Advocacy Groups can apply an intersectional approach to their respective areas of policy making and advocacy efforts.

Canada's demographics represent diversity in all its forms. To develop policies that recognize the vastly different experiences of those who inhabit this land, attention must be paid to ensure that those at the margins are fully included. Often, we refer to these groups or individuals as the most vulnerable, a phrase that is typically used to acknowledge that we have a collective societal responsibility to take care of one another. For example, refugees are referred to as some of the world's most vulnerable because their realities of migration stem from violations of human rights. Factors like race and gender identity, among many others, can play a specific role in shaping their experience in becoming refugees, their migration journey, and their resettlement process, where applicable.

There is no singular all-encompassing scale to assess vulnerability. Intersectionality is a more effective way to understand the multiple forms of discrimination refugees face. Using such an intersectional approach to policy development and advocacy efforts allows for targeted decision-making that places value on the lived experiences of refugees.

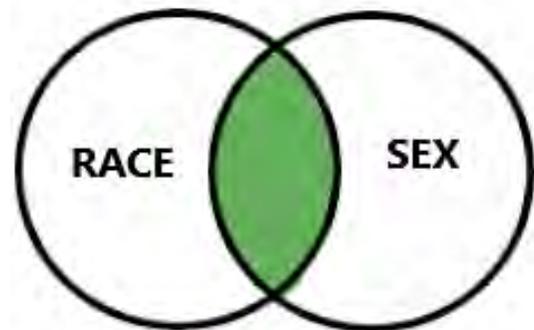


Understanding Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept coined by legal scholar and activist, Kimberlé Crenshaw. It was first introduced in 1989 through her work, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*.ⁱ

Crenshaw's work as it is applied today, analyzes the ways in which oppressive institutions—including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia and classism—are interconnected and overlapping. Hence, they must be examined and tackled in relation to each other.

The crux of Crenshaw's original argument is that there is a narrow focus on cases that illustrate the experiences of sexism affecting white women and racism affecting Black men in America.ⁱⁱ Further, because of this, "single-axis framework," the intersection of sexism and racism that Black women experience simultaneously, is erased.ⁱⁱⁱ



Intersectionality illustrates that looking at something like one's sex as a stand-alone factor misrepresents issues of inequality and inequity. Any conversation about sex must also include race, otherwise it serves only to push forward equality for white women.

In the modern feminist context, intersectionality is used to acknowledge that individuals or communities may experience more than one form of discrimination. This exists at different structural levels. For instance, discrimination is often enforced by a state through both its historical contextualization and current policies. It is also perpetuated by the active shaping of negative public opinion which can breed ground for hate speech and hate crimes.

In other words, intersectionality recognizes the unique experiences faced by those who are subject to multiple layers of oppression and is used to highlight the different ways systems of power affect them.

We saw a concrete example of this in Canadian politics during the women’s suffrage movement. The goal of attaining the right to vote was largely for white, affluent women to increase their own power and privilege in Canadian society.

Despite the efforts of abolitionists, labour union workers, and other supporters of the movement, every year we collectively remember and celebrate this victory as one that white women claimed for themselves in 1916.^{iv} However, we continuously neglect to mention that the right to vote deliberately excluded women of colour and Indigenous peoples. The latter were not afforded this same right until 1960.^v

Another example is Canada’s shifting support for immigrants. We often say that Canada is a welcoming nation for migrants, a claim we boast on the international stage. However, immigration to Canada for a long period of time was only allowed for white settlers. This began with Western Europeans and then eventually expanded to other parts of Europe.



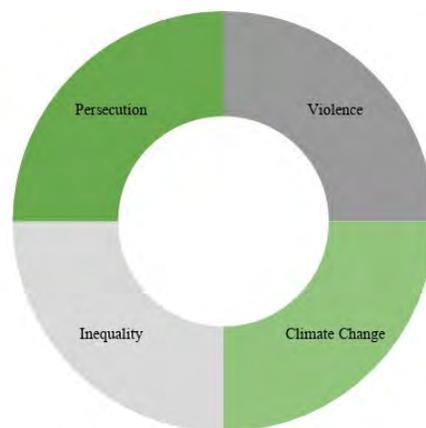
It wasn’t until 1962 that legislative efforts were made to begin the process of reducing Canada’s racist immigration policies.^{vi} Far too often we forget that migrants of all sorts, and refugees especially, were continually turned away based on racial discrimination.

Examples like these demonstrate why intersectionality is so critical when pursuing both advocacy efforts

and policy initiatives. We must actively ensure our advocacy does not dismiss, ignore, or erase the needs of the most vulnerable for the advancement of the more privileged. To do so, it is imperative that we continually push for the inclusion of intersecting identities and provide effective allyship to these communities as we fight for human rights in the pursuit of justice.

Root Causes of Migration

We commonly consider refugees to be the most vulnerable group of migrants because, for them, migration is necessary for survival. To understand the complexities of survival-based migration we need to look at the root causes that create displacement. Broadly, the reasons people are forced to migrate outside of their countries of origin can be summarized into four main categories. They are: **persecution**^{vii}, **violence**^{viii}, **inequality**^{ix} and **climate change**.^x

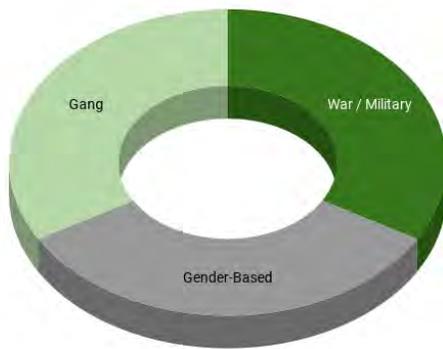


These categories can be interconnected and have branches that exist underneath their respective umbrella terms. An intersectional approach is helpful when examining root causes because it can identify more specifically the circumstances that force refugees to flee in the first place. Additionally, it can highlight those who are being affected disproportionately and why it is that they face additional forms of discrimination. Good policy-making serves to incorporate and reflect these realities with the goal of achieving tangible results.

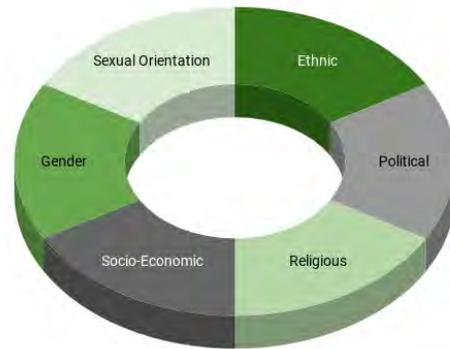
If we break down the umbrella categories further, we start to pinpoint different areas of need and can visualize where these root causes overlap. This is where we see government often playing a role in providing specified support for refugees. For Canada, this is most notably provided through the form of resettlement, a process that acts on elements of an intersectional approach. The Government of Canada utilizes an inter-departmental form of analysis commonly referred to as GBA+ or gender-based analysis plus. There are recent examples of how this methodology has informally played out in

terms of Canadian immigration policy. One instance we can look at is the root cause of **violence** and its sub-section of **war**. In 2015, the Government of Canada recognized that the Syrian Civil War and accompanying human rights violations had resulted in an influx of Syrian refugees globally. As a result, they committed to resettling ~25,000 members of this vulnerable population.^{xi}

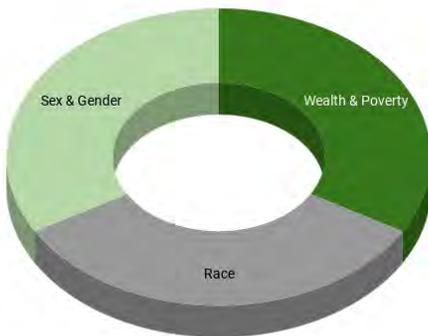
Examples of Violence as a Root Cause



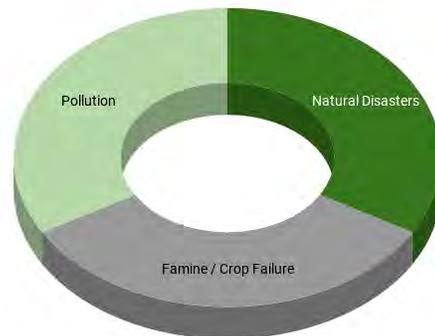
Examples of Persecution as a Root Cause



Examples of Inequality as a Root Cause



Examples of Climate Change as a Root Cause



Similarly, if we look at both the categories of **violence** and **persecution** and their branches of **gender** and **ethnicity**, we see an area where Canada recognized the intersectionality of vulnerability in the case of Yazidi refugees from Iraq. Based on the combination of ethnic and religious persecution along with gender-based violence, Canada resettled ~1,200 Yazidi refugees and other survivors of Daesh.^{xii} This shows that an intersectional approach can play a key role when applying refugee policy in practice.

Intersectionality & Policy-Making

In 1995 the Government of Canada introduced a gender-based analysis approach aimed at furthering gender equality.^{xiii} This concept has been expanded into the government's more widely known GBA+ initiative. GBA+ serves as an analytical process in recognition that policies have differential effects on people based on their sex.^{xiv} The 'plus' element of this analysis is utilized to indicate a level of intersectionality. Specifically, it is meant to showcase that experiences vary beyond just biological sex.^{xv} This is where factors including race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and disability come into play.



There are other instances where intersectionality appears to be on the radar as well, particularly through Canada's role as an international ally. Canada's *Feminist International Assistance Policy* is aimed at targeting women and girls, the poorest, and the most vulnerable as a response to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.^{xvi} When it comes to domestic policy, there are instances where GBA+ has successfully resulted in an intersectional approach to policy. In 2018, *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* launched the *Visible Minority Newcomer Women* (VMNW) pilot program. This initiative was developed to address barriers faced by racialized, newcomer women when entering the labour market, including discrimination based on both race and gender.^{xvii}

It is clear that governments can take active steps to address inequity by way of an intersectional approach to policy-making. Therefore, it is imperative that such methods of analysis are entrenched within government departments and routinely used as a consistent part of policy development. This should be done in conjunction with the representation of diverse peoples whose lived experiences provide immense value through well-informed decision making. Innovative policies and programming ought to be continually developed to advance the needs of the most vulnerable.

Targeted programming that supports the intersectionality of race and gender, among others, particularly for refugees, is also necessary.

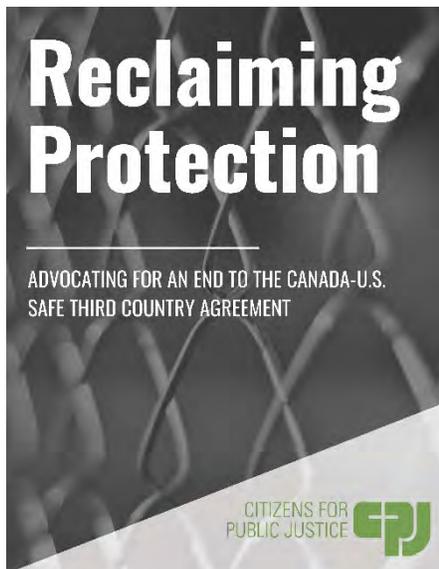
Intersectionality & Advocacy

In April 2017, CPJ released *A Half Welcome*, a report highlighting some of the top concerns Sponsorship Agreement Holders faced with private sponsorship. The findings indicated that general wait times, wait times for non-Syrians, allocation limits, and travel loans were some of the most pressing issues in resettlement.

Conducting an intersectional analysis of this report illustrates that these findings suggest clear issues of inequity. Concerns raised regarding the differentiating wait times between Syrian applications and other applications resulted in a hierarchy of prioritization, without necessarily meaning to.

Advocacy in this case, called on government to commit to providing adequate resources to partner organizations for better management of application processing.

Advocacy with an Intersectional Approach:



In 2019, CPJ took a closer look at the issue of travel loans by conducting interviews¹ with refugees currently in the process of repaying their loans. From this sample, those facing the most difficulty included women, single-parent families, and people with disabilities. This means that the most vulnerable groups were facing additional burdens. These layers of burden could only be recognized by taking an intersectional approach to research.

Similarly, in 2018, CPJ's report *Reclaiming Protection* also demonstrated systemic inequities. This report called for an end to the *Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA)*.



A HALF WELCOME

DELAYS, LIMITS, AND INEQUITIES IN CANADIAN REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP

April 2017

CITIZENS FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE 

¹ Interviews conducted in-person with refugees originally from Africa, Asia and the Middle-East.

Included were highlights of some specific policy changes made in the United States that rendered it unsafe for refugees.² One policy change disqualified gender-based violence as a reason for female-identifying persons to claim asylum.^{xviii} Under an intersectional analysis, this clearly demonstrates that the United States is not a safe place for womxn³ and girls seeking refuge based on gender persecution and discrimination.

Accompanying this research was a letter template to Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen, and later to Bill Blair, Minister of Border Security, calling on each of them to recognize the violation of refugee rights in the United States and rescind the STCA. This served as an opportunity for CPJ members to engage meaningfully with advocacy efforts.

Changes in leadership and immigration policy have caused increased levels of overt xenophobia, racism, sexism, and religious discrimination. As a result, the United States is no longer a safe place for many refugees. With Canada actively moving to apply the STCA across the entire land border, we are positioning ourselves along the same lines.^{xix}



From 2016-2018 claimants who crossed between ports of entry were predominantly from Nigeria and Haiti.^{xx} The framing of irregular border crossers in Canada, through the “Closing the Loophole in the STCA” narrative, actively uses anti-Blackness as a tool to criminalize those seeking to make a refugee claim.

The lack of discussion surrounding anti-Black racism in conversations about refugees is negligent and only adds to efforts aimed at vilifying certain claimants over others.

There is a continual rejection of the oppression Black people face in both the United States and Canada. As such, the added layer of marginalization that they experience based on immigration status is also ignored.

² This focus on refugees can be extended to include others with precarious immigration status such as refugee claimants or asylum seekers.

³ Womxn is an inclusive form of the term “women,” which allows for self-identification.

There is a range of discrimination issues connected with the STCA, including religious persecution, gender-based violence and sexual violence.

Religious discrimination poses yet another threat to refugees in the United States. President Trump’s “Muslim Ban” in 2017 targeted Muslim-majority countries, before issuing a broader travel ban on refugees.^{xxi}

Some refugees from Central America are actively facing deportation, with those who identify as LGBTQIA+⁴ being sent back to the gender-based and sexual violence they tried to escape from.^{xxii}

An intersectional analysis of these policies unequivocally demonstrates that the United States is not a safe country for the most vulnerable. It is unconscionable to consider a country where children are forcibly detained^{xxiii} and families are separated^{xxiv}, to be safe.

If Canada is committed to adhering to its international obligations, GBA+ strategy, and its international feminist governance framework, the Government must rescind the STCA.



⁴ LGBTQIA+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and more. Typically, “2S” meaning Two-Spirit, is included within this acronym, forming 2SLGBTQIA+. As Two-Spirit only applies to certain Indigenous peoples in Canada, and given that Indigenous peoples are not refugees, it is not appropriate to include within this context.

Christian Faith-Based Advocacy

Over the years, churches have played an important role in Canada's refugee resettlement process. They are frequently Sponsorship Agreement Holders who partake largely in the private sponsorship of refugees and often provide an immediate community for newcomers.

In accordance with the Bible, Christians are called to serve the world's most vulnerable by acting as the hands and feet of God on Earth. The vulnerable include the oppressed and persecuted, the poor and the weak, the widows and the orphans, the prisoners and the foreigners.

To serve God means caring for others, this act demonstrates the love, compassion and mercy Jesus offered us, that we might follow this example in our relations with others.

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25: 41-46)

This call to serve becomes even more evident in practice when looking at recent trends in global migration.

The Word also highlights that God's people are required to care specifically for refugees,

"When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:33-34)

The position of Christians in Canada is one of immense privilege and political legitimacy. It reflects a diverse range of theological perspectives and cultural practices. This privilege

must be used as a catalyst for intersectional advocacy. One effective way of doing so is through inter-faith advocacy and allyship.

For example, Christians need to actively stand up against Islamophobia. Within the refugee context this is especially imperative when this hateful public discourse of xenophobia is affecting people based on their faith, country of origin, and race. This targeting is increasingly directed at womxn who are deemed “visibly” Muslim. Those who wear a hijab, niqab, burka, abaya, turban, or cover their head and/or body through other means.



It is not only necessary to recognize the systemic inequities exist but also to combat the growing negative public opinion refugees are subject to in Canada. As a result, Christians ought to commit to extending our vision of servanthood to include care and solidarity while making public our efforts to stand up for the rights of refugees. In order to accurately advocate for the needs of others, we must first understand who the most

vulnerable are and how their experiences have been shaped.

There must also be a recognition that vulnerability is created through systems of power that aim to oppress and marginalize. These systems include **colonialism**, the **patriarchy**, **white supremacy**, and **heteronormativity**. Christians need to consider the areas in which our faith has been (and continues to be) used to create, encourage, and uphold these violent agendas. In our advocacy work we need to dismantle structures that seek to oppress and marginalize communities in the name of God. In Canada, it is our duty to follow the lead of Indigenous Peoples in Canada to right the wrongs of sexual abuse, torture and genocide that Christians actively constructed and participated in throughout the *Residential School* system. Churches are obligated to root out the white supremacist and patriarchal ideology that has been woven within Christianity for far too long. We cannot ignore the existence of such rhetoric while it continues to radicalize those in our pews. There have been some strides made in combatting misogyny, but far more is needed for the Church to treat womxn with the same dignity demonstrated by Jesus. We

must also work towards unlearning when it comes to addressing the violence experienced by the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Refugees belonging to these communities flee their homes in search of safety. It is essential to ensure they do not face discrimination in our midst too.

By taking an intersectional approach to advocacy, we can better recognize our own privileges alongside both conscious and unconscious biases. We must commit to the difficult process of unlearning behavior and reconciling with the oppressive internalized emotions that affect many of us. Intersectionality offers the opportunity to understand how these power dynamics affect specific individuals and groups and denote where Christians must expand our idea of who the most vulnerable are.

Particularly for refugees, we need to examine how these societal systems interact with the added discrimination they can face because of their immigration status. For womxn and girls, this means understanding that they may flee their country of origin due to persecution in the form of gender-based or sexual violence.

From here, we can note that the resulting trauma of such experiences requires specialized healthcare, and that in resettlement countries, including Canada, racism and gender-based violence also exist. Being a womxn-identifying refugee who is also a person of colour comes with added marginalization, as does belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community. More difficulties can arise if an individual has limited proficiency in English or French and if they live with a disability. When combined, these aspects of identity illustrate how people can be disproportionately disadvantaged and reiterates the multiple forms of discrimination that intersectionality aims to account for.



This is where well-informed advocacy becomes critical, and Christians have both the opportunity and duty to fight for the rights of refugees—we are called to be allies. It is imperative that we take up our privilege and use it in the call for justice. Ensuring that we take an intersectional approach to these challenges is critical for us to witness tangible change. As a result, we can better support those whom we have been called to serve.

Conclusion

Intersectionality can be used as an analytical tool to actively ensure efforts aimed at supporting the most vulnerable are **efficient, equitable, and effective**. To make use of the value intersectionality brings to policy-making and advocacy, the following are recommendations for various stakeholders:

Government of Canada

- 1) Treat intersectionality as a non-negotiable, consistent, and imperative piece of gender-based analysis. Focusing on biological sex while relegating intersectionality to the all-compassing “plus” serves to prioritize equality only for white women.



Ensuring an intersectional approach is entrenched into policy-making rather than optional, is important in the specific case of refugees in Canada who are predominantly racialized individuals, often womxn and girls, with complex identities fleeing dangerous circumstances that require specific support initiatives.

- 2) Intersectionality must be comprehensive and intertwined throughout the policy development process. It is not enough to perform a post-policy analysis. While there is value in collecting evidence-based data, it becomes useless when there are no efforts to create tangible policy changes based on those analytical results.



The collection of this data becomes risky and problematic when it has the potential to be used against persecuted communities. In advocating for meaningful change, there needs to be a human rights-based approach from governments that protects the vulnerable from being exploited.

Advocacy Groups

- 1) Continue to push for inclusion by identifying existing areas where additional support is needed to appropriately serve the most vulnerable. This support can include access to material resources, funding, or network capacity.

- 2) Ensure that advocacy campaigns are constructed in a manner that centers the diverse lived experiences of refugees. Refugees and other vulnerable populations are not voiceless.



Advocacy must steer away from the notion of “Giving Voices to the Voiceless” and move towards a mentality of “Nothing About Us, Without Us.”^{xxv} This can be done by actively including refugees in their work through consultation, organizational partnerships, and most efficiently, through staff hiring of those who have been refugees themselves.

Churches & Faith-Based Advocates

- 1) Expand the understanding of who the most vulnerable are. Learn, validate, and recognize how vulnerability has been shaped by a variety of lived experiences and multiple layers of discrimination.
- 2) Acknowledge the Church’s resistance to accepting intersectionality. Mobilize advocacy that is rooted in a faith-based, intersectional approach while utilizing ecumenical resources developed by those doing frontline work.



Overall

There must be a concrete and targeted effort to partner with and fund womxn’s organizations who do the groundwork and already provide intersectional approaches to their missions.

By providing resources directly to those who understand this work and operate with this framework day-to-day, Government, Churches and Advocacy Groups can expand their allyship around these issues while achieving tangible results supported by credible expertise.

Endnotes

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