Episode 6: Myth – Gender inequality has a one-size-fits-all solution

Overview:

What is intersectionality, anyway? We'll demystify it in this episode--and delve into the myth that gender inequality can have a one-size-fits-all solution.

Intersectionality shows us how we need to consider how our different social identities such as race, gender, religion, Indigeneity, immigrant status, disability, and sexual identity all intersect to play a significant role in how we experience the world. So, rather than creating policies, services, and research that homogenize people, we need to make sure we apply intersectionality—or we risk leaving people behind.

Featured Guests:

Dr. Sharla Alegria, Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of Toronto

Dr. Courtney McCluney, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Cornell University

Research Mentioned:

1. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1(8). https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf
2. Collins, P.H. (2008). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Routledge.
3. The Combahee River Collective (1986). "The Combahee River Collective Statement" in *Theorizing Feminism*, Herrmann, A.C. and Stewart, A.J. (eds). Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429494277-3/combahee-river-collective-statement
4. McCluney, C. (2021). "White People Prefer for Black People To Codeswitch at Work." *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/courtneymccluney/2021/08/23/white-people-prefer-for-black-people-to-codeswitch-at-work/?sh=509746746ff4

Additional Sources:

https://www.gendereconomy.org/intersectionality/

Transcript:

Courtney McCluney: Although we like to think all women as one group, we all experience sexism and patriarchy differently. And it is our unique experiences with those systems that can help us imagine a better world for us all, by dismantling every form of oppression that affects all women.

Sonia Kang: That was Dr. Courtney McCluney, talking about how important it is to understand that women experience inequality differently. Welcome to the second season of Busted, a podcast by the Institute for Gender and the Economy, otherwise known as GATE. In this podcast, we bust prominent myths about gender and the economy that are somehow still floating around out there and holding back progress. We're gonna team up with leading experts to chat about what the research says and give you the tools you need to bust each myth yourself. I'm Dr. Sonia Kang, Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour and Human Resources Management at the University of Toronto, and my pronouns are she and her.

Carmina Ravanera: And I'm Carmina Ravanera, Senior Research Associate at GATE, and my pronouns are she and her.

Sonia: To kick off our second season, we're starting off with the myth that all women share the same experiences and, more broadly, that gender inequality can be addressed with a one size fits all solution.

Carmina: When people hear a myth like that, they might think, "of course women don't all share the same experiences. Everyone lives their own life, and all of those lives are so different." It sounds silly when you say it like that, but the reality is that a lot of policies, practices, and procedures in the gender equality space are set up as if women really do share the same experiences, and that what they want and need will be very much the same.

Sonia: And we don't just hear this about women, but many other groups as well.

Carmina: Basically, the lens that we need here is intersectionality.

Sonia: Ooooo buzzword alert!

Carmina: Ha ha, yeah, intersectionality has definitely become quite a buzzword over the past few years. We hear it all over the media, in policy analysis, and in research. So, what we're gonna unpack here is: what is intersectionality? Why is it important? And what are some common things that people get wrong about it?

Sonia: Okay, so let's start at the beginning. How can we define intersectionality in a way that's easy to understand?

Carmina: Well, we've got a couple of experts to talk to us about that. I talked to Dr. Courtney McCluney, a self-described recovering academic. She's currently on leave from her position as an Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Cornell University. I also spoke to Dr. Sharla Alegria, an Assistant Professor of Sociology here at the University of Toronto. You might remember her from last season. Both of them are experts in this space so I asked them how they would define intersectionality for someone who knows nothing about it.

Courtney: Intersectionality is a way to understand the world. It's a lens that we can look through to understand how systems, policies, norms, and even social interactions are shaped by intersecting isms. And I think we're familiar with a lot of isms, like racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. And rather than trying to simplify individual experiences as merely a function of our own predisposition or personality, instead we can start to see our lived experiences as interconnected with these larger systems, and that can help us actually reimagine policies that work for a vast majority of people who are often marginalized and disenfranchised, even if they're in slightly different ways. So that's how I would sum it up, is intersectionality is a lens by which we can better understand the world by seeing things as more complex and interconnected than we'd like to think they are.

Carmina: So that was Courtney's definition – here's Sharla's.

Sharla Alegria: Intersectionality is an idea specifically intended to help us see that multiple factors about our social locations shape the way we experience social structures. But it's also an idea with a set of myths that honestly kinda need busting. Intersectionality is a theoretical perspective rooted in the understanding that we simultaneously occupy multiple social locations and these are differentially shaped and are also shaped by our experiences with power and opportunity structures. Now I realize what I just said was abstract, complex, and nuanced. I gave an academic definition. It also did not include words like race or gender that we typically associate with intersectionality. So let's breakdown some of these ideas a bit more. When I talk about social locations I mean things like race or gender, but not in a biological way.

Instead, social locations are more about what gender means to us and how we come to have identities that have these meanings. And when I talk about opportunity structure I mean the formal and informal rules we have for moving through the world. These can be formal things like the rules that government makes for how immigrants can gain legal permanent residence or informal things like how to greet an acquaintance when you see them on the street. It's probably fairly straightforward to imagine a few ways that a person's experience with the formal immigration process might be different depending on their social location. This process will be easier for immigrants who speak English or French, who come from countries with education systems similar to Canada's so their degrees are recognized.

Sonia: Okay, so I'm hearing that intersectionality is a lens to understand complexity, right? Our societies are shaped by lots of different forces, some are good, and some are bad, like "isms" -- sexism, racism, classism--so the forces affect people differently. In other words, depending on our social location, as Sharla says, we will experience the same policies, processes, or institutions in really different ways.

Carmina: Yeah. And Sharla's example about immigration is a good one here, because it really illustrates what social location means – your specific income, language, race, religion. All of those things are going to have an impact on your unique experience of immigration.

Sonia: I think another example that people hear a lot about is the gender wage gap. Here in Canada, the wage gap between men and women as of this year is 11 cents – women make 89 cents for every dollar men make. But because of racial inequality, women of color experience the gender wage gap more severely, so they make 67 cents for every dollar men make, and Indigenous women make 65 cents to the dollar. All of this to say, people experience the world differently from one another, even within specific social groups, like women, in this example. But before we go further, I think we need to talk a bit about where this idea of intersectionality even came from.

Carmina: Yeah, so the term as we know and use it now was coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex", in her writing on Black feminist theory. She's still working on these issues today. But there are other people who were thinking about intersectionality before her, and specifically, thinking and writing about how Black women have fundamentally different experiences than white women or Black men. Sharla and I chatted a bit about this.
Sharla: Kimberlé Crenshaw is a legal scholar who gets credit for coining the term intersectionality. She did and is still doing important work to develop the idea but is part of a tradition of what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins calls Black feminist thought. Collins developed the concept of Black feminist thought to describe the ways that Black women's particular social location shapes their perspective. She's describing both elements of what Black feminist thought is, and the argument that the structure and conditions that lead to Black feminist thought can't be fully separated from the ideas themselves. For Collins, Black feminist thought includes always considering race and gender together. Collins and Crenshaw get quite a lot of credit for developing the idea, but they didn't invent it. And Collins is particularly good at giving a sort of genealogy of how the thought developed. She'll trace it back to folks like Sojourner Truth, whose "Ain't I a Woman" speech captures the idea that her race makes her experience of womanhood really different from white women's experience at the time, but also really different from Black men's experiences. The Combahee River Collective was a Black lesbian feminist socialist group writing about these ideas in 1970s in early 80s. Audre Lorde's work too captures these ideas around how race, gender, class, and sexuality are present in our interactions and shape our experiences with social structures, so that our experiences among women are not always the same. I find one of Kimberlé Crenshaw's early examples really helpful. She was looking at a legal case where a Black woman, Emma DeGraffenreid, had filed a lawsuit against a car manufacturer for not hiring Black women. A judge had dismissed the case because the car company did hire white women, so there was not evidence of gender discrimination, and they also did hire Black men, so there wasn't evidence of racial discrimination. There was no legal space to claim that the discrimination was happening at the intersection of race and gender. So, the judge dismissed the case. And this is what intersectionality does.

It creates a way to identify and address inequalities that arise at the intersections of multiple social locations.

Sonia: Okay, right. So Sharla's talking about a case here that really highlights how certain groups can be excluded and therefore left unprotected in our laws and policies. It also reminds me of how, even in workplaces today, we'll have initiatives for gender equality, and some working towards racial equality, but not a lot of action focussed at the intersections of those two identities.

Carmina: Absolutely. And I encourage listeners to check out some of these authors and thinkers – Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, the Combahee River Collective, and Sojourner Truth – to learn more. We've put a couple of resources in the show notes if you're interested.

Sonia: Something I want to talk about as well is what intersectionality isn't. Because I think, even though it's become more well-known recently, there are still a lot of misconceptions out there.

Carmina: Right. There are a couple of things I want to bring up here. The first misconception is that taking an intersectional lens means invoking a quote unquote oppression Olympics. Some people think this is a competition where we're adding up disadvantages to see who comes out on top... or I guess, the bottom. Here's what Sharla had to say...

Sharla: This is where we get into some of the myths around intersectionality. If we simplify the idea too much we can get to a place where we're thinking of all the different ways that people can be disadvantaged, and then wanna tally them up into some sort of most disadvantaged subject who intersectionality is meant to the champion. This is where the idea starts to become controversial. This oversimplified version seems to want the interests of people whose identities are multiply marginalized ahead of those whose identities are less marginalized. But this is pretty far from the academic idea I was describing above. Instead, intersectionality is going to give us a way to consider how people's multiple social locations shape their experience, how those locations matter as they navigate social structures, and how we can reimagine social structures to make those experiences more equitable all around.

Sonia: Okay, so what I'm hearing is that thinking about intersectionality in this additive way is really oversimplifying it. It's not true to the original idea. When we say that women have different experiences depending on their social locations, we're not saying that people with the most marginalized identities are the "winners" in a game of intersectionality. We're interrogating how different identities matter in our social structures, and how we can use that knowledge to make those structures more just and equitable for everyone.

Carmina: Exactly. And there's another misconception about intersectionality, too. I've heard people say that because we could think about an infinite number of intersecting social identities, from race to gender to sexual orientation, ability, religion, immigration status, Indigeneity, and so on, that it's too difficult or even impossible to apply intersectionality in research or policy. So, like, it's interesting to think about but not really practical. I asked Courtney about this line of thinking.

Courtney: I think part of the difficulty that stems from assuming applying intersectionality will be hard is from how we're expected to do work as a society. We look for simple, efficient, quick fixes that involve as little conflict as possible, and those norms, they've been in place for a long time, but they can be undone and reimagined so that how we work can be used create more equity. I think practically speaking, that means people need more time to do their work, so they can do it well and thorough and robust, in ways that are actually relevant for people's lived experience, instead of trying to churn things out really quickly. We need to make sure that we involve people in all phases of our research and policy-making process and make sure that they are equitably compensated for the time and labour that it takes to do this work, and make sure that we are redistributing the resources of who even has the power to create the research question, and to create the research and policy agenda. Make sure we're redistributing those resources in

the hands of those who are actually impacted by the policies or research outcomes that we have. I also think that this assumption of intersectionality being difficult to apply ignores how we have designed entire worlds, almost, or systems, especially in our research and policies, that centre white, heterosexual, able-bodied men. And that is considering numerous social identities. And if we look into our not-so-distant past here in the US, we have various legislative acts like the Homestead Act or GI bills that are perfect examples of how laws and policies created different outcomes for white men, the benefits of which continue to persist today. Those two acts in particular made it easy for white men to access land and home ownership, but there were lots of rules and criteria that were put into place on who would qualify for things like the Homestead Act and for GI bills. And they somehow miraculously all centred around white, heterosexual, able-bodied men, right? So it is not impossible for us to do, it is difficult because it requires us to do and think about things differently.

Sonia: Whoa, that's such an interesting reframe. Everyone has multiple social locations – not just people who are more marginalized, and our social structures are set up to benefit whiteness, men, heterosexuality, and ability, more than other identities. An intersectional lens that benefits dominant groups is already implemented in our society all the time. We're living it everyday.

Carmina: And I love how she talks about how we often feel rushed about our work and pressured to get things moving, so intersectionality becomes easy to set aside for later...or never. But that's just not right, paying attention to intersectionality up front is a crucial step in creating effective public policy or doing research accurately. If you skip it up front, you're going to end up having to correct for it later.

Sonia: So what are the consequences when we don't consider intersectionality?

Carmina: I asked Courtney about what happens when we act like women are a monolith, and here's what she had to say.

Courtney: We definitely can limit the scope and imagination of what's possible and what is needed for us to achieve things like gender equity and parity by narrowly focusing on women as possibly being white, able-bodied, a citizen for whatever country that they are in, heterosexual etc. And what I find so interesting about this question and this idea of gender equity in particular is the person who coined the term intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw, it was her examination of domestic violence manifesting itself differently in the lives of women at the intersections of various identities that helped to further illustrate this harm that can come about when we assume that women are a monolith. So this includes like lesbian women not having their reported violence from domestic partners taken seriously, Black low income trans women being unprotected and murdered at rates that are unprecedented because of our inability to see them as women, Black heterosexual women's reluctance to involve police officers in domestic disputes given the history and patterns of racial violence by police officers in Black communities, and even immigrant and undocumented women risking deportation by seeking support from institutions that would rather see their citizenship status or lack thereof as the main quote-unquote crime that's been committed, as opposed to their domestic violence situation. So I think those are some of the extreme but nevertheless relevant examples of why it is so important we consider intersectionality when it comes to things like gender equity and gender equality.

Carmina: Another example – and something that we're working on at GATE – is care work policy. Since the pandemic, we've been focusing on how our society can place more value on paid and unpaid care work, a kind of work that's disproportionately done by women. And we can easily see how an intersectional lens is important here. So, although paid care workers are mostly women overall, white women tend to be concentrated in the higher status care jobs, like nursing. On the other hand, immigrant women of colour tend to be concentrated in roles that are paid less and don't come with sick leave or benefits – like personal support workers, nursing aides, or child care workers. And that might leave them and their families struggling when it comes to accessing important institutions like healthcare or education or the legal system.

Sonia: So, if we're talking about improving care work policy but don't apply an intersectional lens, we may easily forget the workers who are in the most precarious situations. Their needs basically fall through the cracks and we miss out on whole sections of the care worker population who might require different policies.

Carmina: Basically, without an intersectional lens, we're missing a lot. And that's going to have real impacts on people's lives.

Sonia: Hmmm okay, let's talk about the flip side. Are there any examples of how to do intersectionality right? How can we use an intersectional lens to make organizations or policies more just and inclusive?

Carmina: Courtney is actually doing research on this right now. She and her team are looking into racial codeswitching at work, and they're using an intersectional lens. I'll let her explain.

Courtney: What our research did, it elevated conversations on the ways that professionalism norms affect Black people at work. And our findings, our strongest findings to date, really focus on the experiences that black women are having in what's considered professional contexts. So as a back story racial code switching is defined as a strategy where individuals modify their appearance, speech, behavior, emotions or any other form of expression in order to optimize the comfort of others who have the power to control their access to desired outcomes or resources. And my colleagues and I primarily studied this in a workplace context, because there's lots of things that we want or desire to have through our work. We want to have a sense of meaning at work, feel included, but also we need the monetary resources that come from having a job, having a well-paying job and a stable job. And unfortunately in US and I think in most western societies, Black people are socialized to make sure they're modifying their self-presentation in professional workplaces, because all of the elements of Black culture, everything from African American Vernacular English or your taste in food, style of music, the way you style your hair, they are stereotyped as being the opposite of an ideal worker. Some of the stereotypes of Black people that go against the norms of professionalism at work are things like laziness, incompetence, and there's been a lot of our research and several others of scholars that looked at Black women's natural hair as being perceived as someone who is incompetent, lacking in professionalism, someone who's more angry or dominant just based off of how their hair is textured and styled. This creates a lot of pressure for Black women in the workplace to adjust their hairstyles, and one of the ways that they've done it in the past maybe forty years or so is by using a chemical relaxer. And this is something I think a lot of Black women and girls are quite familiar with. It is an actual chemical that's applied to your hair and scalp to straighten your hair texture and make it similar to that of white women. There has now been some research documenting and linking the use of things like chemical relaxers to higher rates of uterine cancer and breast cancer diagnoses in Black women, not to mention that it's costly to treat your hair and straighten your hair over time. And there's a lot of psychological damage that I think happens as well if you're constantly being reminded or told that aspects of your culture or your appearance do not belong, are not professional, do not fit. And this could make it really hard for Black women to want to show up to work, to apply to these well-paying and stable jobs, and this is probably explaining the reason of why so many Black knowledge workers in the middle of the COVID pandemic were quite reluctant to return to the office because it was probably their first time experiencing some sort of reprieve from having to code-switch so much. So the ways I've seen this being shifted into policy in the workplace—a lot of companies have looked at our work, we put it in the Harvard Business Review so it would have access to a larger group of people beyond academia. And lots of organizations reached out to me personally, either for one-on-one training and coaching with their HR team, revising policies and handbooks when it comes to professional dress and code, to make sure that they are being as inclusive as possible. And through starting with Black women as a starting point we were able to expand all different ways that people of various religious backgrounds and ethnic backgrounds are also code switching at work. Everything from accent bias to blanket statements like not wearing head coverings—all of a sudden I'm making it really hard for people

who wear head coverings as part of their religious and cultural identity to feel like they fit in and belong at work.

Sonia: Interesting. So, the initial research focus on Black women's hair led to broader conversations iabout how intersectionality is key to creating more inclusive workplaces. And that lens has spread to other intersecting social identities, as well.

Carmina: Exactly.

Sonia: So, what should organizational leaders do? How can they make sure they're thinking intersectionally?

Sharla: I think one of the most powerful things they can do is consider what the experience of someone who's different from them might be in the organization. Are there rules, facilities or other expectations that assume people have particular backgrounds beyond their qualifications to be in their role? For example, something as small as having gender-neutral restrooms can really change how some people will experience the organization. One of the insights I get from intersectionality is to always start from the position of women of colour in a space or a social structure. What's that experience going to be like?

Carmina: I think as a leader or anyone in a position of power, you need to constantly be asking – who might I be forgetting when I make this decision? Think about the case that Kimberle Crenshaw wrote about, where Black women were unprotected by the law because no one had considered how racism and sexism might impact workers at the same time. Think about what intersections you may not be thinking about in your work or even in your day-to-day life. And that means listening to what people from across different identity groups and their intersections are telling you they need.

Sonia: Right. So, from our conversation today, it's clear that gender inequality cannot have a one-size-fits-all solution. Treating women like they're all the same and need the same things is not only inaccurate, it can also have dangerous consequences. The same goes for other groups – men, immigrants, people with disabilities, and on and on. One way to understand that complexity of people's experiences is through the lens of intersectionality.

Carmina: Yes – and if our listeners at home see someone perpetuating this myth that women share the same experiences, here's what they can say to bust this myth.

Courtney: One is that although we like to think of women as one group, we all experience sexism and patriarchy differently. And it is our unique experiences with those systems that can help us imagine a better world for us all, by dismantling every form of oppression that affects all women. So rather than trying to collapse our differences or obscure them or trying to only centre one voice at a time, what would a cacophony of women's voices all speaking about the various ways they have experienced oppression and disenfranchisement mean and do for creating a better society?

Sonia: With that, make sure to subscribe so you don't miss our next episode of Busted! We'll be busting the myth that good leadership means masculine leadership. Make sure to join us then.

Carmina: Until next time, happy mythbusting!