Responding to inequities in public policy

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Responding to inequities in public policy: Is GBA+ the right way to operationalize intersectionality?

Introduction

The Canadian federal government has proclaimed its commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis which has amplified existing inequities, reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and recent Black Lives Matter movements leading to shifts in how the state confronts racism, the primary approach to addressing inequities in policy making remains ‘Gender-Based Analysis Plus’ (GBA+),\(^1\) overseen by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE). GBA+ is referred to as both a gender and intersectionality analysis, intended to capture sex and gender alongside other identity factors such as race, disability and age, in the design of policies to ensure more equitable outcomes for differently situated groups (WAGE 2021a). Yet GBA+ is inconsistent with what an intersectionality approach calls for and it is worth exploring whether it is an adequate policy tool for understanding and responding to the most complex and pressing inequities of our times.

In this *New Frontiers* piece, we review research in the field to analyse the incompatibility of GBA+ with intersectionality; review policy developments to analyse its wider effects; and outline future directions for both research and policy. We argue that GBA+ is inadequate to the task of designing equity into public policies, and that there is a critical need to develop fully intersectional tools that can account for the ways in which intersecting structures of inequality shape one another.

The inherent challenges of GBA+ from an intersectionality perspective

GBA+ was introduced in 2012 to replace Gender Based Analysis (GBA), which did not explicitly consider other factors or the importance of intersectionality. However, notwithstanding GBA+ being branded as intersectional, gender-based approaches to which other factors are added are antithetical to intersectionality, and are leading to its co-optation in public policy (Christoffersen 2021; Bowleg 2021; Hunt & Hankivsky 2020; Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery 2019) since intersectionality does not prioritize any one factor. As research on intersectionality’s operationalisation in the UK has shown (Christoffersen 2021), approaches that privilege one marker of inequality are necessarily additive ones – viewing one inequality structure as more important than others is contrary to viewing these as always shaping one another, meaning that it is important to ascertain which forms of inequality are most salient in particular contexts. Additive approaches position people as statically either privileged or oppressed along what is constructed as the primary axis of inequality, with other inequalities thought only to augment this status (Christoffersen 2021). This is far from the relational understanding of power, oppression and privilege, encapsulated by the Black feminist theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Collins 1990), demanding not an either/or, but a *both/and* frame.

GBA+ was introduced in 2012 to replace Gender Based Analysis (GBA), which did not explicitly consider other factors or the importance of intersectionality. Notwithstanding them being branded as intersectional, gender-based approaches to which other factors are added are antithetical to genuine intersectional work, which does not prioritize any one factor (Christoffersen 2021; Bowleg 2021; Hunt & Hankivsky 2020; Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery 2019). Additive models like GBA+ position people as statically either privileged or oppressed along what is constructed as the primary axis of inequality, with other inequalities thought only to augment this status. This is far from the relational understanding of power, oppression and privilege, encapsulated by the Black feminist

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\(^1\) In the realm of health, SGBA+ (sex and gender based analysis +) is used to explicitly acknowledge the biological aspects of health.
theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; 1991; Collins 1990), demanding not an either/or, but a both/and frame. As research on intersectionality’s operationalisation in the UK has shown (Christoffersen 2021), multiple inequality structures shape one another, meaning that it is important to ascertain which forms of inequality are most salient in particular contexts.

Evaluations of GBA+ in Canada have reached similar conclusions (Cameron & Tedds 2020; Hankivsky and Mussell 2019; Findlay 2019). For example, Findlay (2019) observes that the ‘+’ in GBA+ is resulting in an additive approach which intersectionality seeks to correct, and that even when GBA+ extends beyond considerations of gender, it leaves out or rarely considers other important factors such as language, marital status and sexual orientation. Moreover, in a truly intersectional approach, the combinations of relevant factors of difference and how they interact with one another is a context-specific question, meaning the centrality of the gender axis is not assumed, as it is in GBA+ (Hankivsky & Mussell 2019). Therefore GBA+ simply cannot be framed, as WAGE does, as an intersectional analytical process (WAGE 2020), yet it is nonetheless gaining momentum in policymaking and funding allocation processes in Canada.

Wider policy effects of GBA+

GBA+ has been framed as a critical policy tool to assess the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic and develop effective policy responses (e.g. Johnstone & Momani 2020; WAGE 2020; Bauer 2020), but is challenged by international evidence that race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status have as much or even more impact on the inequitable risks, experiences and outcomes of the pandemic (Yam et al. 2021; Hankivsky & Kapilashrami 2020). As Hankivsky & Kapilashrami have argued, “For the ‘pandemic era in which we live’ a more sophisticated analysis is required. This analysis should indeed capture experiences of different groups of women, men and gender diverse people...gender must be recognized as an intersecting component of wider structural inequalities. What is needed is a nuanced understanding of sex and gender based on an intersectional analysis and not a silo approach to tackling single-axis vulnerability” (2020). Indeed, COVID-19 related socioeconomic and health inequities are fundamentally intersecting: the synergy of structures of inequality including but not limited to settler colonialism, sexism, structural racism, political borders, heterosexism and cisgenderism, ableism, and capitalism is what creates disproportionalities of risk, outcomes and wider social effects. Ultimately what is required is transcending a hierarchy of inequalities privileging gender, to understand the interaction of factors.

The limitations of GBA+ are also apparent in how government funds civil society organizations. It is well established that civil society plays a critical role in local, national and international politics, mobilising a range of diverse groups and interests (Collins and Bilge 2016; Christoffersen 2021). WAGE’s funding programs to eligible non-governmental organizations (NGOs) prioritize what can be considered a gender-first approach (e.g. in the Women’s Program, ‘women’ are invoked as a homogenous, undifferentiated group: ‘The objective of the Women’s Program is to achieve the full participation of women in the economic, social and democratic life of Canada’ (WAGE, 2021b). This limits the kind of work that NGOs can apply for funding to conduct. Meanwhile, parallel funding from Canadian Heritage funds projects which target Indigenous, racialized communities and religious minorities, and guidelines do not mention gender (Canadian Heritage 2021). This raises the important question of whether siloed funding actually undermines the potential of organizations to operationalize intersectionality, for instance building coalitions to develop projects which cut across these overlapping communities. In contrast to other jurisdictions where funding is not siloed and collaboration is actively encouraged (e.g. Scotland), NGOs are less able to decide which combination of inequalities to target work on since projects are required to benefit either women or Indigenous or racialized communities or religious minorities. Equality NGOs, run by and for marginalized groups, are important because due to the overrepresentation of intersectionally privileged groups among
policymakers, they are a key potential source of intersectional knowledge and policy influence (Collins and Bilge 2016). If their capacity to operationalise intersectionality is limited, important opportunities for knowledge exchange are missed.

GBA+ discourses also affect independently resourced funding organisations, promoting depictions of intersectionally marginalised women exclusively in discourses of deficit. For instance, descriptions of the realities of increased risk of gender based violence amounting to genocide of Indigenous women sidestep the fundamentally interlocking nature of settler colonialism, sexism and structural racism, suggesting that these risks come from within Indigenous communities and not from white men (the predominant perpetrators), and are exacerbated by the choices made by Indigenous women:

‘When we look at data related to gender equality, it reveals that some groups face different and/or higher risks than others... Here are some examples related to gender-based violence:... the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is a tragic example of how intersecting barriers impact women’s safety and well-being. Due to the legacy of colonization, residential schools, and marginalizing policies, women in Indigenous communities face complex barriers... they experience higher rates of poverty, unstable housing, gender-based violence, and other forms of systemic discrimination... high-risk activities perpetuate vulnerability to violence by making it more difficult for these Indigenous women to escape the vicious cycle of violence’” Canadian Women’s Foundation 2021, emphasis added). This is because ultimately the root cause of this violence is necessarily constructed as gender (‘gender-based violence’), not the intersection of experience produced by the mutually constitutive structures of settler colonialism, sexism and structural racism. In contrast to deficit discourses, the Native Women’s Association of Canada clearly argues for the need to position women as ‘agents of change’ (2010, 7; Findlay 2019).

Another illustration worth highlighting is Canada’s newly established Anti-Racism Secretariat that is charged with implementing Canada’s Anti-Racism Strategy 2019-2022. The strategy emphasizes that “applying an intersectional lens reveals a complex picture of the way that different groups and individuals are excluded and harmed” (Government of Canada 2019, 2). Simultaneously, the Secretariat states that it seeks to implement GBA+ in its work, yet it does not provide any information on how this might be realized, especially given that its efforts focus on addressing systemic barriers and particular challenges that result from racism (as opposed to patriarchy or sexism or by prioritizing a gender first approach). Yet a single issue approach to race in Canada cannot account for the complexity of the intersecting factors and processes of race, ethnicity and Indigeneity; and even less so the ways in which these three distinct processual factors intersect with gender, disability, sexuality, gender identity, religion and socioeconomic and legal status.

**Future Directions**

GBA+ is an important stepping stone to a fully integrated intersectional approach, but the current context underscores that the potential of the ‘+’ is far from realized because intersectionality remains inadequately understood. Several avenues of research ought to be pursued to advance the theoretical development and practical operationalization of intersectional analysis in public policy.

First, there is need for conceptual and operational clarity vis-à-vis intersectionality, both within and outside of government. In a recent examination of GBA+ in the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), Johnstone and Momani (2019) surveyed participants to assess their confidence in understanding of intersectionality, but the authors did not discuss intersectionality in their analysis nor reflect on its influence or importance in relation to the cultural organizational change they call for. In the first empirical study internationally to explore how both...
practitioners and policy makers themselves understand how to operationalize ‘intersectionality’, Christoffersen (2021) found multiple, contradicting applied concepts of intersectionality, some of which advance intersectional justice while others actually serve to further entrench inequities. Additive approaches which privilege one inequality either make intersectional marginalisation invisible or manifest exclusively in paternalistic projects which further stigmatising deficit discourses. Therefore there is a pressing need for further research in Canada to explore how policy makers and equality NGOs conceptualize and operationalize intersectionality at all levels of decision making and across different sectors. Applying intersectionality in policy making demands new approaches to intersectional knowledge, and there is great potential for knowledge coproduced with specialist NGO equality practitioners to advance intersectional approaches to policy and practice.

Second, there is an urgent need to develop new tools which can account for the interlocking nature of processes structuring social relations and identities. There are other calls for movement in this direction. For example, Pictou (2020) has argued that in order to ensure patriarchal colonialism is taken into consideration, GBA+ and intersectionality must be approached together from an Indigenous feminist perspective or as an Indigenous Intersectional Gender Based Analysis + (IIGBA+) approach (Pictou 2019). And, Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak (LFMO) which aims to build a strong, successful, and responsible organization whose voice is heard throughout the Métis Nation, has proposed a Metis specific GBA+ (2019). These approaches seek to reform the shortfalls of GBA+, where gender is elevated because it is viewed by many as one of the most fundamental factors of inequity (Hankivsky and Mussel 2019), while in other jurisdictions other factors are prioritised.

Others have called for replacing GBA+ with an Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) to integrate the concept of intersectionality in a manner that better reflects core aspects of the theory (Cameron and Tedds 2020). The IBPA (Hankivsky et al. 2012), the first tool internationally to operationalize intersectionality globally, developed by the Institute for Intersectionality Research and Policy, does not use any factor, variable or social location as an entry point. It has been further identified that what is required is a focus on issues (without predetermining which issues affect which social groups) (Parken 2010; Verloo 2013) (for instance, hate crime), and intersectionally marginalised experiences of them, including those that defy binary concepts such as gender (Christoffersen 2021) (for instance the specific ways in which it is experienced by trans, Two-Spirit and gender non-conforming people of colour). While these are important developments, there are still gaps in knowledge about the enabling or restricting factors for the integration of intersectionality in policy (e.g. structural constraints such as siloed funding), how to develop intersectionality competencies, and what mechanisms would be most effective for knowledge exchange between policymakers and NGOs. How is intersectionality conceptualized and operationalized among the latter (not limited to feminist organizations: among also racial justice, disability rights, LGBTQI rights, migrants’ rights organizations, and intersectional combinations)?

The naming of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw was a call for transformation of what were clearly single issue policy approaches to inequalities, including gender and race, because they obscure inequalities for Black women and women of colour. However, in spite of language to the contrary, precisely the same processes are at work here in Canada 20 years after this urgent call was made. When the term ‘intersectionality’ is mobilized by policymakers, it can serve to mask that in reality approaches remain single issue (Christoffersen 2021) such as in GBA+. COVID-19 in particular has created a juncture in which we might break from siloed path dependency and meaningfully address inequalities in a way that will be significantly more effective than in times past. However, with adherence to GBA+ as the government strategy for addressing inequities one can observe a crucial missed opportunity that requires urgent attention.
The time may have come to stop bending and stretching GBA+ for purposes for which it was not originally intended. Just as the government shifted from GBA to GBA+ to recognize the importance of intersectionality, it is now time for the next change to shift from GBA+ to an Intersectionality-Based Analysis, informed by synergies between sectors of government and civil society to embed intersectionality in its authentic and intended form into policymaking in Canada.

References


