



Working life inequalities: do we need intersectionality?

Paulina de los Reyes

To cite this article: Paulina de los Reyes (2017) Working life inequalities: do we need intersectionality?, *Society, Health & Vulnerability*, 8:sup1, 1332858, DOI: [10.1080/20021518.2017.1332858](https://doi.org/10.1080/20021518.2017.1332858)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20021518.2017.1332858>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 19 Jun 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15135



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 5 View citing articles [↗](#)

Working life inequalities: do we need intersectionality?

Paulina de los Reyes

Department of Economic History, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Evidence shows persistent inequalities between women and men regarding working conditions, wage levels, work time, work environment, and career opportunities. At the same time, research results show that inequality in the workplace is not only about gender differences. The specific conditions of oppression built on the simultaneous operation of class, race, and gender relations of power goes beyond the simple dichotomies involved in traditional class analysis or gender studies. Age, nationality, race, sexual preferences, bodily impairment, and class background are crucial factors in the opportunities and obstacles that people face at work. In this article, I discuss how an intersectional perspective can deepen our understanding of the informal hierarchies that create and preserve work life inequalities. Drawing on postcolonial theories and feminist perspectives on labour, I argue that the significance of an intersectional analysis is not primarily about the discrimination mechanisms based on intersecting forms of oppression. Rather, I see the potential of intersectionality in a critical interrogation of the shaping of different perceptions of labour emerging in current models of capitalist accumulation.

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality; inequality; work regimes; capitalist accumulation; precarious work

Evidence shows persistent inequalities between women and men regarding working conditions, wage levels, work time, work environment, and career opportunities. The impact of these inequalities on health and well-being in the workplace has preoccupied researchers, practitioners, and politicians who identify gender inequality as a threat to women's health (Forte, 2016). At the same time, research results show that inequality in the workplace is not only about gender differences. Age, nationality, race, sexual preferences, bodily impairment, and class background are also crucial factors in the opportunities and obstacles that people face at work (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Mulinari & Sellberg 2013). Intertwined relations of power not only express unequal opportunities in employment but also provide glimpses of the invisible norms, values, and attitudes that construct some people as different, deviant, and subordinate. How can we understand inequalities that emerge from intertwined relations of power? And how can we approach the particular conditions of oppression shaped in the intersection of gender, class, race, and other relations of power?

In this article, I will briefly discuss how an intersectional perspective can deepen our understanding of the informal hierarchies that create and preserve work life inequalities. My starting point is that intersectionality not only offers new ways to explore how different forms of inequality interact in working life but also contributes to an understanding of how institutionalised rules, norms, beliefs, values, and

attitudes create specific forms of vulnerability that often remain unrecognised in workplaces.

The experience of 19-year-old T illustrates this situation.

T came to Sweden as an adoptive child when she was only a few months old. She has a neuropsychiatric diagnosis, but she finishes the secondary education level, as do other young people. After school graduation, T obtains her first job in a restaurant. She is happy and proud of being hired, and she works hard to stay focused and to do well during her shift.

One day, she is assigned a new task: she must receive a delivery of goods. While she checks the cargo, the truck driver asks her, "Where are you from?" When T says where she was born, the man replies, "You should be grateful that you are here and not in a cotton field in your home country". T is appalled; she considers Sweden to be her home country, so why did he say that? She tells her boss, who understands that T felt hurt and uneasy. The manager contacts the supplier and ensures that the truck driver will not deliver goods to the restaurant so T will not have to meet him again.

However, for T, the event is not over: she worries and fears that something similar may occur again. Her happiness and pride are gone, and she can hardly concentrate on her duties. In the end, she decides to resign. After a while, she obtains a new job as a waitress in a hotel. While she serves a party of several middle-aged men, one man grips her buttock as he orders more booze.

T becomes upset and cannot bring herself to return to serve the men. She is so upset that she does not have the energy to speak to her manager or anyone else. The man complains that he has not received his order, and the boss is angry that T has refused to serve the customer.

“If you take offense at something the client has said or done, well, then, you should ask another staff member to enter and manage the order. The customer should always get their order”, says the boss.

T is not called back to work at the hotel. After a week, she calls to ask what has occurred and is told that she is no longer welcome to work there. She refused to serve the customer who groped her. She did wrong.

After these events, T considered filing a complaint for discrimination with the Equality Ombudsman (DO). However, to translate her experiences into the language of discrimination proved to be a difficult and challenging procedure. Even though T was certain that she had been discriminated against, she could not tell on what grounds she had been harassed. Was it because of her gender or her skin colour? Would she have been harassed in the same way if she had been older? And in what way had her neuropsychiatric diagnosis influenced her ability to handle these incidents in the workplace?

The fact that we are “more than just men and women” – to use the words of feminist scholar Diana Mulinari (2003, p. 21) – has been a recurrent theme in gender research. It is usually noted that women are not a homogeneous collective entity, and many researchers underline that gender is a differentiated category. Despite these theoretical insights into gender as an analytical category and into women as diverse and historically shaped subjects, traditional perspectives on gender equality in Sweden commonly refer to women as a collective entity with common interests, needs, and problems. This approach is also true in work life research, where issues of gendered racism have been remarkably untheorised (de los Reyes, 2016; Mulinari & Selberg, 2013).

The work of sociologist Wuokko Knocke is in this context a noteworthy exception. For a long time, her groundbreaking research on immigrant women’s wage labour and trade union participation in the 1980s was unique. Her starting point in structures of class, gender, and ethnicity sheds light on the specific conditions of subordination faced by Finnish and Chilean female industry workers in Sweden (Knocke, 1986). According to Knocke, the fact that these workers were women and migrants involved not only conditions of exploitation as workers but also gender subordination and ethnic discrimination. Examining the position of migrant women in the workplace, Knocke identifies two central aspects. On the one hand were stereotypical perceptions of these

women as uneducated and unskilled; on the other hand was the coding of specific work tasks as gendered and therefore of the workers as simple and unqualified. The combination of gender, ethnic, and workplace hierarchies contributes in this way to the subordination of migrant women (Knocke, 1991).

A growing awareness of the specific conditions of oppression built on the simultaneous operation of class, race, and gender relations of power goes beyond the simple dichotomies involved in traditional class analysis or gender studies. When the conflict between labour and capital or the contradiction between femininities and masculinities is conceptualised as the most fundamental social antagonism, the particular conditions of exploitation derived from subjectivities shaped in the intersection of several structures of power becomes invisible. In this context, the idea of intersectionality has emerged as an intellectual and political challenge for researchers, practitioners, and activists dealing with work life inequalities and, more specifically, with the relations of power, exploitation, and subordination established by categorisations on the bases of gender, class, sexuality, and race.

Intersectionality already had a long trajectory before it became a category of analysis in the Swedish context. Black feminists in the U.S.A. used the term to problematise both the invisibility of racism in gender narratives and class analysis and the silence about gender oppression in strategies against racism. However, most accounts of the trajectories of intersectional thinking start with the theoretical contributions of Kimberlé Crenshaw, who published *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* in the late 1980s. The term “intersectionality” was coined by Crenshaw in developing a theory that explains the specific conditions of oppression affecting women who experience both racist subordination and class exploitation – and, at the same time, gender injustice (Crenshaw, 1989).

Returning to T’s situation, it is obvious that her position in gender, ethnic, age, and class structures creates a specific vulnerability in her work life. However, even though her situation could be understood as an illustration of the ultimate vulnerability that is created in the intersection of different forms of oppression, I argue that the significance of an intersectional analysis is not primarily about the discrimination mechanisms based on the accumulation of different forms of oppression. Rather, I see the potential of intersectionality in a critical interrogation of the shaping of different perceptions of labour emerging in current models of capitalist accumulation.

Practices that differentiate people are, according to post-colonial thinking, linked to the expansion of commodity production and the emergence of differentiated labour regimes that make multiple forms of

exploitation possible (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Interrogating the logic of capital accumulation intersectionality goes beyond neoliberal perceptions of diversity that prize differences among people but remain silent on inequality. Intersectional perspectives shed light on the mechanisms that create inequality markers and explore the contexts that make the existence of difference natural, unquestioned, and desirable. Against this background, the issues of interpretative precedence, the colonisation of the experiences of the other, and the silencing of critical voices are central to understanding the operations of power through the constant divisions between “us” and “them” (de los Reyes, 2016).

Returning again to T’s experience, it is obvious that an analysis that must choose among different grounds of discrimination is likely to reduce the complexity of her experience of discrimination. Furthermore, since class inequalities are not considered grounds for discrimination, the link between discrimination and a vulnerable position in the labour market becomes invisible. Jurist scholars and discrimination experts Eva Schömer (2014) and Susanne Fransson (Fransson & Norberg, 2007) for a long time have pointed to the shortcomings of discrimination law, since it does not recognise the existence of multiple discrimination or the impact of simultaneous grounds for discrimination. In this context, it is argued, an intersectional analysis is crucial to address the relations of power expressed in the combination of different and interacting grounds of discrimination and to recognise the specific vulnerability resulting from multiple conditions of oppression (Schömer, 2014).

The centrality of power becomes crucial when we use an intersectional approach to discrimination and inequality in work life. From an intersectional perspective, discrimination and inequality are not considered anomalies in an otherwise fair order, but rather are seen as central components in the organisation and distribution of material and symbolic resources in society. Historically, we can see the importance of gender divisions as well as racialised categories in organising work and distributing power. For instance, ideas of national belonging and gender-specific qualifications have been central to constructing different kinds of workers and in making different regimes of labour normalised, functional, and profitable in Sweden. In this context, practices that position workers in differentiated class, gender, ethnic, and age categories express not only the power to define who represents the normal, the accepted, and the attractive workforce but also who is considered deviant, subordinated, and undesirable.

In what way do these normative perceptions influence T’s experiences? Which ideas of “deviance” form her vulnerability in work situations? As shown above,

anti-discrimination laws do not acknowledge the existence of multiple discrimination. However, being forced to choose what kind of discrimination is in play compels people in T’s situation to translate their experiences into a language that gives legitimacy to their claims. In this context, the hierarchical order of different discrimination grounds becomes another instrument of power. In a Swedish context, where gender equality is an established social value at the same time that racism is systematically denied, it may be easier to accept that T has been the victim of sexual harassment than that she has been the victim of racism. Informal hierarchies between different forms of discrimination as well as the normalisation of certain forms of discrimination can thus lead to a double oppression: both to be discriminated against and to be denied the right to define what one has experienced.

T’s experiences remind us that variations in how we perceive different forms of oppression can be considerable. Information, level of knowledge, institutional support, and political legitimacy are aspects that contribute to the visibility of certain power relations and normalise others. The variations in what Spivak has called a “discursive space” make it possible to voice some experiences of oppression while remaining silent about others (Spivak, 1996). The awareness of power relations is also necessary in considering the political shortcomings of information campaigns. Being in a position of power makes it possible to be isolated from experiences of oppression and to choose to remain ignorant of the conditions of powerlessness.

Historian Monika Edgren (2014) has shown that diversity policies dealing with ethnicity, sexuality, and bodily impairment are often based on notions of cultural differences, divergent identities, or disability. Even though these differences are analysed in relation to a dominant norm, the power aspects often remain unproblematised. In contrast, gender issues are commonly framed as a power relation demanding not only a recognition of women but also a redistribution of power, influence, and control between women and men. Analysing the impact of diversity strategies in academia, Edgren concludes that a recognition of differences that ignore power relations tends to perpetuate differentiation, segregation, and unequal conditions in work life. In this context, an intersectional perspective contributes not only to revealing the complexity of the operations of power but also to exploring the contexts in which perceptions of difference become inequality.

Focusing on power relations allows intersectionality to grasp not only the differentiation processes that construct some people as deviant and discriminated but also how the construction of difference is

inherent to processes of capital accumulation. From this perspective, T's situation is also related to the vulnerability resulting from the unstable working conditions and forms of exploitation that characterise the place-bounded service work.

Here, an intersectional perspective can make a difference, not primarily because T's story could expose the ultimate example of intersectional oppression – where gender, age, ethnicity, and bodily ability are the central and most meaningful categories – but rather because it provides an opportunity to highlight and problematise the interwoven logics of power that in specific work contexts create unequal positions and informal hierarchies.

Thus, the question is whether T's situation can be analysed without taking into account the structural processes that characterise the global capitalist organisation of work and livelihood. Historically, categorisations based on gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality marked boundaries of belonging and defined the conditions for entitlement to national resources. Issues of nation and belonging thus become closely linked to the organisation of labour worldwide and to the establishment of racialised hierarchies in the labour market.

According to post-colonial research, the colonial mapping of the world is re-created in current labour market hierarchies in the rich West world (Brah, 1996; de los Reyes, 2016; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). In this context, the multiplication of borders analysed by post-colonial researchers Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) refers not only to national territories or regions but also to differentiated working regimes, that is, hierarchical constructed models for the organisation of work involving different wage conditions, laws, access to rights, work hours, labour environment, and so on. These models are no longer coincident with the traditional boundaries between the rich and the poor parts of the world but coexist in the same territory and sometimes in the same workplace.

Post-colonial research contributes in this way to illuminating the intersections that make colonial representations a useful instrument in the construction of multiple working regimes characterised by differentiated access to welfare security, protective regulations, and collective bargaining. At the same time, the connection between discriminatory practices and a conditional citizenship is linked to colonial representations of a subordinated “other”. The existence of a growing precariousness in working conditions is in this way naturalised by perceptions of a “diverse” labour force.

Post-colonial feminist research in Sweden identifies the articulation of gender equality with nationalism as a central node for understanding the construction of immigrants, and particularly of

immigrant women, as essentially deviant from Swedish norms and consequently as a given target group for gender discipline, particularly in the labour market. The creation of low-paid and unqualified jobs in a gender- and ethnicity-segregated labour market has historically been accompanied by a characterisation of migrant women as less competent and qualified than other women and in less need of welfare reforms such as childcare or part-time jobs. A clear example is when employment opportunities within the tax-subsidised domestic service sector are presented as an integration strategy for migrant women (Calleman & Gavanas, 2013; de los Reyes, 2016). Additionally, the class and racialised dimensions of this strategy become evident when it is argued that a market for care work can contribute to achieve gender equality goals, since it allows (wealthy) Swedish women to solve work life imbalances by buying care work and other reproductive work (de los Reyes, 2016).

It is in this context that we can evaluate the truck driver's comments on T's background. The facts that she is a woman, young, and racialised automatically link her position to a subordinate role in society and in work life. When T, in contrast to these representations, supervises the driver's job, she must be placed back in a subordinated position by his reminding her of her country of origin and demanding her gratitude. Drawing on Essed's (1991) theory of everyday racism, we can also understand T's distress as a reaction to accumulated experiences of racist stigmatisation, denied belonging, and nationalist exclusion.

An intersectional perspective is thus closely connected to a post-colonial reading of the relations of exploitation that characterise the organisation of capitalist production in a globalised world (Brah, 1996; de los Reyes, 2016; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). A central point of departure is that the organisation of the economy in the current capital accumulation regimes offers not only endless consumption possibilities for the privileged elites around the world but also new ways to exploit people's vitality, commitment, emotion, and creative capacity (Virno, 2004). In this context, the requirements in the workplace are not a question just of skills and qualifications but also of differentiation along lines of class, age, gender, sexuality, and nationality. This is particularly evident in the service sector and in care work. Research results show that working conditions in those sectors often involve an increased commodification of feelings and emotions, which in extension also helps to weaken collective class organisation and to create new hierarchies as well as subordinated and fragmented subject positions (Calleman & Gavanas, 2013; Virno, 2004).

T's work life experiences illustrate how different relations of oppression construct informal hierarchies and unequal conditions in the workplace. It also shows the

pitfalls in analysing the exercise of power based on simple class or gender antagonisms, while it exposes the shortcomings of an understanding of inequality, oppression, and discrimination based on group identities. Even though differences between groups illustrate inequality, other explanations are needed to explain the existence of gender-, age-, and race-based hierarchies in work life. Here, an intersectional perspective can make a difference.

When we interrogate the power relations that are at stake in T's case, an intersectional perspective shows not only that her experiences represent an ultimate example of the operation of multiple and interacting relations of power but also that the construction of difference is a precondition to a fragmented, precarious, and unstable working life. Thus, T's story reminds us of the necessity to theorise about the manifestations of power in work life and about the various forms of exploitation that link perceptions of different people to demands for increased profitability, greater efficiency, and endless gratitude. A key challenge for future intersectional studies is to develop knowledge beyond the usual categorisations that can highlight and problematise the ways in which ideas of different categories of workers are articulated in current processes of capital accumulation and normalised exploitation. Such analyses may make it possible to formulate work life strategies that can prevent the story of T from being repeated in the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of diaspora. Contesting identities*. London: Routledge.
- Calleman, C., & Gavanis, A. (2013). *Rena hem på smutsiga villkor?: hushållstjänster, migration och globalisering*. Göteborg: Makadam.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory and anti-racist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–167.
- de los Reyes, P. (2016). Practising intersectionality, challenging power. In K. Dalborg & M. Löfgren (Eds.), *Perspectives on cultural leadership*. The fika Project. Göteborg: Nätverkstan.
- de los Reyes, P., & Mulinari, D. (2005). *Intersektionalitet: kritiska reflektioner över (o)jämlighetens landskap* [Intersectionality: Critical reflections on the landscape of (in)equality]. Malmö: Liber.
- Edgren, M. (2014). Jämställdhet och mångfald som administrativa praktiker. Plan-och policy dokument vid svenska lärosäten 1995–2013. In P. de los Reyes (Ed.), *Inte bara Jämställdhet. Intersektionella perspektiv på hinder och möjligheter i arbetslivet*. SOU 2014:34. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. London: Sage.
- Forte. (2016). *Arbetsmiljö i kvinnodominerade sektorer*. Stockholm: Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare.
- Fransson, S., & Norberg, P. (2007). *Att lagstifta om diskriminering*. Stockholm: SNS förlag.
- Knocke, W. (1986). *Invandrade kvinnor i lönearbete och fack: en studie om kvinnor från fyra länder inom Kommunal- och Fabrikarsamarbetsförbundets avtalsområde*. Stockholm: Arbetslivscentrum.
- Knocke, W. (1991). Invandrade kvinnor. Vad är problemet? *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift*, 3(3), 4–13.
- Mezzadra, S., & Neilson, B. (2013). *Borders as method, or, the multiplication of labour*. Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press.
- Mulinari, D. (2003). Teorier för en antiraistisk feminism. In D. Mulinari, K. Sandell, & E. Schömer (Eds.), *Mer än bara kvinnor och män. Feministiska perspektiv på genus*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Mulinari, P., & Selberg, R. (2013). Intersectional directions in working life research: A proposal. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 3(3), 81–98. doi:10.19154/njwls.v3i3.3012
- Schömer, E. (2014) Arbetsrättsliga perspektiv på jämställdhet, diskriminering och intersektionalitet. In P. de los Reyes (Ed.), *Inte bara Jämställdhet. Intersektionella perspektiv på hinder och möjligheter i arbetslivet*. SOU 2014, 34. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Spivak, G. C. (1996). Can the subaltern speak? In D. Landry & G. Maclean (Eds.), *The Spivak reader. Selected works of Gayatri Spivak*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Virno, P. (2004). *A grammar of the multitude. For an analysis of contemporary forms of life*. London: Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents.