Defining Intersectionality from bellow or from above?
Reflecting on the praxis of intersectionality in French and Canadian women’s rights organizations

Eléonore Lépinard
Eleonore.lepinard@unil.ch
Centre en études genre
Université de Lausanne

Paper prepared for ECPR General Conference in Glasgow

4th -6th September 2014
Defining Intersectionality from below or from above?

Reflecting on the praxis of intersectionality in French and Canadian women’s rights organizations

Eléonore Lépinard

Various accounts of the genealogy of the concept of intersectionality in feminist scholarship (Hancock 2007a, McCall 2005, Roth 2004) trace the concept back to the seminal and influential work of Black feminists and feminists of color. A set of ideas characterizes this intellectual tradition which initiated research on intersectionality: the intersection of at least two axes of domination such as race and gender constitutes a social category with a specific experience of social life, oppression is not experienced in a segmented but in a unified way because social relations are interlocked rather than simply added one on top of the other, this experience of a complex form of oppression shapes subjectivity and a specific standpoint and specific political interests, and these political interests have been denied or misrepresented by theories or policies and need to be put back on the political agenda (e.g. Collins 1990, Crenshaw 1989 and 1991, Hancock 2007a and b, Jordan-Zachery 2008). The concept of intersectionality has witnessed a rapid and large success among academics. Intersectionality is, in the academic literature, a concept loaded with normative ideas and goals relative to the feminist project. Using the concept of intersectionality means for academics, among other methodological challenges, “including the perspective of multiply-marginalized groups”, and, stemming from this premise, challenging the “universal”, that is the social experience of groups whose privileges define the norm against which other groups are considered (Choo and Ferree 2009).

While there is some consensus in the academic literature on what intersectionality means, it is less clear what it represents for activists and how they implement it. The operationalization of intersectionality and its concrete implementation by activists have indeed less often been the object of scholarly inquiry. To take as an object of inquiry practices of intersectionality in feminist movements (and social movements in general) raises a question of definition, and therefore a question of method. Indeed, in many contexts activists do not know what
intersectionality is or means. How should we then define what is an intersectional practice, and who should have the authority over this definition? In other words, should we evaluate intersectional practices using the academic definition of the concept, with its normative content; or should we inductively define intersectionality by looking at activists’ discourses and practices?

In this paper I investigate the extent to which the theoretical and political premises of intersectionality have been adopted, or not, by women’s rights organizations as their main framework to conceptualize the social experiences and identities of women situated at the intersection of several axes of domination, and to include what is perceived as their specific interests in the praxis and ideology of the organization. Drawing on a comparative fieldwork in France and Canada, I argue that intersectionality is one of the repertoires a women’s organization can use, but it is not the only one. Hence, I document the various ways in which feminist organizations respond to the challenge of including women who are vulnerable to other types of oppression than gender alone. By doing so, I make more apparent what is specific to the concept and the praxis of intersectionality. I also show that each repertoire comes with opposing political consequences, both for racialized women and for the women’s movement in general.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS

The concept of intersectionality has attracted a lot of theoretical and methodological attention (McCall 2005). Recent research on intersectionality has been calling for new ways and metaphors to think about the race-class-gender nexus as the product of processes taking place at multiple levels and in various social settings (Choo and Ferree 2009, Yuval-Davis 2006). However, since its inception, the concept also aimed at providing a tool to critically analyze social and political practices, and in particular feminist practice (Collins 1990, Collins 2012). Crenshaw’s concept of political intersectionality aimed at making visible the marginalization of the political interest of women of color by both the feminist and the anti-racist movement in the
US context, and called for a politics of coalition to demarginalize those interests (Crenshaw 1989). Hence, the issue of how women’s movements can concretely include intersectionality on their agenda and in their practices in order to bridge across differences rooted in social relations marked by oppression, political marginalization, imperialism or economic exploitation, has been a central concern to intersectionality theory. This article proposes to explore this crucial question with an original comparative framework in order to identify the various forms that intersectional practices can take.

The issue of the heterogeneity of the group “women” is not new for women’s movements. One of the ways in which bridging differences has been attempted historically in women’s movements is with the invocation of forms of “sisterhood” or “solidarity” (e.g. Smith 1995, Lawston 2009). Expressions such as “double oppression”, “double violence” (Lesselier 2007) or “triple jeopardy” (Nelson 2003:62) which characterized many Western women’s movements from the 1970s and 1980s, pointed to the need to properly address the specific needs of disadvantaged intersectional groups inside the women’s movement. Contemporary women’s rights organizations face similar dilemmas, and a growing and promising body of research examines women’s rights organizations with an intersectional lens. A first strand of research examines the genealogy of “separate roads to feminism” - to use Benita Roth’s expression - shaped by the broader political context and the ways in which structures of inequality differently shaped collective identities for intersectional groups such as White women, Black women or Chicanas in the U.S. (Roth 2004). The resulting conflicts, negotiations or strategic alliances between these separate movements is the focus of another strand of research which explores more precisely the relationships between majority women’s movements and minority women’s movements, looking at politics of alliances but also exclusions (Nelson 2003, Breines 2006,
Predelli and Halsaa 2012). For example Line Nyhagen Predelli and Beatrice Halsaa comparative work on the UK, Spain and Norway looks at conflicts but also instances of strategic sisterhoods between women’s organizations separated by racial and ethnic identities (Nyhagen Predelli and Halsaa 2012). Looking at similar organizations at the European level, Lise Rolandsen Agustín describes four strategies they have adopted to address diversity: minority inclusion into majority organizations, intersectional agenda setting and self representation by minority groups, coalition building among majority and minority organizations, and dual strategy of inclusion and self representation (Rolandsen Agustín 2013:80). With a similar eye to investigating how organizations can work together despite differences, an adjacent strand of research focuses on intersectionality in the context of coalition building, at the national level (Cole 2008, Townsend-Bell 2011 on Uruguay) or at the international level (Weldon 2006, Giraud and Dufour 2010).

In this growing field of research, scholars tend to analyze intersectional inclusion in a binary way: either minority women and/or their interests are included or they are not. What those intersectional interests are, who defines them and how they are perceived as subsumable on the agenda of the organization is not the focus of attention. On the contrary, I propose here to focus on how intersectional interests are articulated, perceived and defined by women’s rights organizations. Indeed, I posit that intersectionality, as it is defined in feminist theory, is only one of the possible ways for an organization to frame and represent the political interests of disadvantaged intersectional groups, and that other ways exist as well. Hence, I focus on who is conceived as the legitimate bearer of these interests, and I explore if those interests are conceived as separate or included in the feminist agenda (see table 2). Hence this paper investigates for example if, for activists, intersectional interests can be subsumed under other more “universal interests”, if women who share similar social traits must represent them, or if any feminist can
have a mandate to defend them. I use the concept of repertoires, borrowed from the sociology of culture, to capture the various ways in which women’s organizations understand, conceptualize and include the identities and interests of women vulnerable to oppression other than gender oppression. Cultural repertoires are “schemas of evaluation mobilized at the discursive or interactional level” (Lamont and Thévenot 2000:8) which are of particular import in the process of drawing symbolic boundaries between social groups. Hence the concept is particularly useful to bridge discourse and practice in the analysis, and to study how the actors in meaning-making activities have an impact on the social dynamics of inequality. Typically, in a given context various cultural repertoires – composing a cultural “tool-kit” (Swidler 1986) - will be available to social actors to explain, evaluate or justify the course of action they will take. In order to grasp various repertoires, I chose to investigate women’s rights organizations in two national contexts with contrasting features that I detail below. I therefore document the various repertoires that organizations might use to think and implement the imperative of inclusion of minoritized women.

DATA AND METHOD

Structural intersectionality originally referred to the race and gender nexus in the U.S. context. However, because the case studies under scrutiny here are Canada and France, this article takes as its object the matrix of domination formed by gender, ethnicity, and migration, understood not as identities but as historical structures that shape patterns of inequality and marginalization. The choice to focus on ethnicity/migration stems from the salience of these issues in public debates and the ever more visible role these interlocked social structures play in
racializing specific social groups, shaping contrasting experiences of citizenship and producing patterns of discrimination in many countries, including the two under study (El-Tayeb 2011).

Despite experiencing similar processes of racialization of immigration and minority religions, France and Canada are contrasted examples national models of citizenship, especially when it comes to the issue of migrants and minority groups’ inclusion. Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism has become well entrenched legally and institutionally: since the 1980s especially, multiculturalism has meant a rejection of cultural assimilation and the valorization of cultural diversity as the very fabric of Canadian society: the diversity of the “Canadian mosaic” has become synonymous with Canadian national identity (Kymlicka 1998: ch.3).¹ Mobilization around ethnic identity is common and encouraged by public authorities as an important dimension of multicultural politics (Bloemraad 2006). Conversely, what has been labeled the French “republican model” promotes a contrasting philosophy of integration, which emphasizes a common, national, civic culture instead of pluralism, an abstract concept of citizenship, color-blindness, and civic and cultural assimilation on the part of migrants (Frader and Chapman 2004) as well as religious minorities. In this context, ethnic categories are deemed suspicious in public debates and often controversial (Simon 2008) which makes mobilization around ethnic identity difficult.

As a consequence, ethnicity does not have the same relevance, to borrow Erica Townsend-Bell term (2011) for women’s rights organizations in both countries. Given the official policy of multiculturalism in Canada the question of ethnic and religious difference is a salient one for Canadian women’s rights organizations. Although not all members of women’s rights organization might be familiar with the term intersectionality, the question of multiple discriminations or of accommodating cultural differences is common knowledge for activists. In
France the focus of attention among organizations has shifted from an initial interest in migration in the 1980s, to an uneasy acknowledgment of the growing relevance of ethnicity and religion. The situation is different in French academia since there is a history of theorization of the intersection of race and class, called “consubstantiality” (*consubstantialité*) or “crisscrossing” (*entrecroisement*) (Kergoat 2000). Furthermore, recently the translation, adoption and use of the term intersectionality by feminist scholars (e.g. Dorlin 2009) testify of the increasing relevance of ethnicity and race for French feminist theory. However, despite these changes, the term intersectionality remains, for the vast majority of French women’s rights activists, unknown.

Notwithstanding their differences in the way their respective conceptions of citizenship accommodate cultural difference, in each country, feminist organizations have taken diverging positions in political debates about racialized minorities’ inclusion, promoting different visions of how religious/cultural difference should be tolerated and accommodated (on the Ontarian case see Bakht 2007, Bassel 2012, Korteweg 2008, Lépinard 2010, and Razack 2007, on the Québécois case see Baines 2009, and on France see Scott 2007). The variety of feminist positioning on the issue of multiculturalism and minority women’s religious rights in both countries suggests that intersectionality maybe conceived, understood and practice in very different ways in the same national context.

In order to grasp these variations, I therefore chose to include organizations run by women from racialized minorities and directing their efforts toward specific groups of women defined by their ethnic, religious or migrant identity, with mainstream organizations that do not claim a specific ethnic or religious identity and are more often than not run by feminists from the ethnic majority. In order to select organizations, in Canada I consulted listings of women’s organizations compiled by official agencies (such as the Québec’s Conseil du Statut de la
femme) and picked organizations representing a variety of ethnic backgrounds and a balance between advocacy-type organizations and service-providers in my sample. All the organizations contacted responded positively. In France, no exhaustive listing exists, but I relied on prior knowledge of the landscape of the women’s movements, as well as snowballing technique in order to identify service-oriented organizations which claim an ethnic/immigrant identity. Given the existing networks among service-providers organizations and advocacy organizations (on issues such as violence against women for example), after the first round of interviews, I was able to identify almost all main organizations that were relevant for this research and to interview the vast majority of them. Potential bias in the sample is in favor of organizations that have a permanent structure and several officers. Smaller community groups with no regular activities and a very small constituency, which exist in particular in Canada, were not contacted. The sample was divided between women’s organizations which present themselves as representing one or several immigrant or ethnic groups and serve specifically women from these groups, which I call dual axes organizations, and women’s organizations which do not claim to represent a specific group of women but rather frame their identity and claims on the basis of gender alone, which I call single axis organizations. This categorization does not imply that dual axes organizations do not participate in networks or actions which focus on women’s rights more generally, nor that single axis organizations do not address issues of migrant or ethnic women in their platforms or actions. The main difference lies in how they frame their identity and the constituency they target or claim to represent. Finally, there is also a difference between how dual axes organizations label and organize in France and Canada. While in France they tend to insist on the migrant (or migrant descent) dimension of their identity, in Canada ethnicity is more often claimed as a defining feature of an organization’s aims and identity. I also included in the
sample organizations focused on advocacy with organizations acting as service providers. These two distinctions overlap to a certain extent: while not all service-provider organizations are dedicated to minority women, dual axes organizations tend overall to be service-providers rather than advocacy-oriented organizations, however they are clearly analytically distinct, and therefore are both useful.

This analysis is based on interviews with feminist activists working in fifty women’s organizations, as officers or heads of the organization. Most of the time only one person was interviewed for each organization. The distribution of interviews and organizations within the sample is presented in Table 1. Organizations were chosen in the biggest cities in two Canadian provinces, Ontario and Québec, as well as in Paris and neighboring cities in France.

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

During interviews, I asked each activist general questions about her organization, its history, its priorities, its sources of funding, its coalition work and its relationships with other women’s rights organizations, and its positioning on controversial issues such legislative initiatives to ban Islamic veiling or Shari’a courts. I also asked how each interviewee conceived of the question of ethnic, cultural and religious differences among women both at the abstract level – how important it is, to what extent it should be reflected in the organization’s priorities - and at the concrete level – how often do they encounter issues relating to ethnic, cultural or religious difference in their day-to-day practices. I asked for specific examples of differences that my interviewees believe should be accommodated, recognized, or included in the organization’s political platform or in its concrete practices, and why. Finally, I also asked them if they were
familiar with the term “intersectionality” and what it meant for them. The interviews lasted between 60 and 180 minutes and were coded using Atlas-ti. 778 quotations in total were coded with over 25 different codes. Out of these quotes, 166 refer directly to intersectional issues and were coded in accordance with the repertoires presented below (for a similar methodology see Lamont et al. 2009). The rest of the quotes relate to the other topics addressed during the interview.

DOING INTERSECTIONALITY: FOUR REPERTOIRES

From the data collected, I have elaborated inductively a typology of four repertoires that activists use to talk about differences among women, structural intersectionality and modalities of inclusion of other differences than gender in their feminist praxis. Although these repertoires present relatively coherent approaches and rationales, they are not exclusive from one another. Sometimes, interviewees mobilized more than one, combined them, or used them consecutively without mentioning their potential contradictions.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

(A): ‘On our own terms’: intersectional recognition

A first repertoire to address the question of differences among women and complex oppression is the claim that racialized/immigrant women have specific needs and interests, and that minority women are better placed to respond to these needs. This discourse, most predominant among dual axes organizations devoted to women from specific ethnocultural
groups also underlines that single axis feminist organizations tend to be ignorant or indifferent to these needs, which is why dual axes organizations have developed in the first place. The matrix of domination is understood as the product of a complex dynamic including the need to integrate into the host society as an immigrant, the specific position of women in their own community and their position as woman who are also part of a racialized minority group. Hence most of the time “immigrant woman” or “South-Asian woman” or “daughter of immigrants” refers to this complex nexus of power relations which characterizes their identity rather than to an additive conception of oppression.

With this repertoire, activists emphasize specific needs that justify a community-based or ethnic-based approach. Nandita⁶, a feminist activist originally from Pakistan, in her fifties, who now heads a South Asian Women community center in Toronto explains the approach of her organization, anchored in the community’s cultural specificity and the specific needs of immigrant women:

“There was a need. Because there was at start... gaps were identified. Gaps related to language, related to culture, related to religious practices, related to marriage, related to family life in Canada, related to the whole issue of the immigrant experience and then things started emerging about employment and you know, recognition of credentials.”

The specific needs that dual axes organizations address are related to immigration status (to help women find employment or file for permanent residency), and to language (providing service in native language for recent immigrants). A common experience, in terms of cultural or migrant background, between the social workers and the women they serve, is presented as crucial. It is a prerequisite for trust, authenticity and solidarity (for similar findings, see Ku
As Samira, a woman in her fifties of Algerian migrant descent who founded and heads a French organization devoted to girls in deprived neighborhoods near Paris summarizes:

“Girls who came to us were mostly of immigrant descent (...) We just did not feel like going and meeting a social worker, a nurse or a teacher or I don’t know who, because their attitude was always full of prejudice towards foreigners, towards immigrants… so to cut this crap it was way better to be among ourselves (...) the idea was not to be framed at all by anybody… to be listened to without prejudice”

However, sometimes, there is more than a politics of needs and shared experience that is at stake: the elaboration of a collective political interest, which differs from the ones represented by single axis women’s rights groups, might be at play. Hints at cultural and racial difference often point towards practices of exclusion, for example in shelters which do not accommodate minority women’s needs in terms of food or language. More broadly, Nandita also suggests that political priorities do not always overlap. Discussing the falling apart of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC, the oldest federal coalition for women’s rights in Canada) due to internal conflicts relating to the exclusion of minority women’s issues (Dobrowolsky 2000), she declares:

“We may have parallel movements. Movements that are different because there was a notion of the equality for mainstream that may be an issue related to choice The issue of equality for women of color may be an issue related to inclusion practices, immigrant rights, immigration, deportation and all of those issues (...) Yes there are bridges, but there has to be a giving up of space, a giving up of power and a willing to embrace that, you know, this is not the other, but this woman is also part of the entire picture.”
Hence, this repertoire understands intersectionality as a specific identity, which is more than just the addition of several types of oppressions, and it can lead, in some cases, to the elaboration of a specific collective interest. In particular the hierarchy of political interests might differ from one proposed by single axis women’s groups, and there might be a political conflict with single axis organizations about inclusivity and representation. This repertoire is therefore very similar to the concept of political intersectionality as elaborated by Crenshaw (1989) and leads interviewees to the same political conclusions, as can be seen in the excerpt bellow from a representative of a French group defending lesbians of color:

“We needed a space for lesbians of color were we could meet without pressure, without having to justify ourselves, where we could organize autonomously our thinking, and politically as well, with a greater consistency between our experiences and our claims with respect to intersecting oppressions (oppressions croisées), racism, sexism, lesbophobia and class struggle. (…) In the previous organization [with White lesbians] we have had great projects and actions. It was a passionate moment of activism. But obviously [White] lesbians and feminists could not evolve on the question of the intersection (croisement) of racism, sexism and capitalism. And there was like a hierarchy of struggles. But we were at the intersection (croisement) of this… intersectional approach did no exist (…) so there was this hierarchy between struggles which I could not bear anymore.”

This quote encapsulate the articulation between what Crenshaw labeled structural intersectionality (lived and embodied social experience at the intersection of several axes of
oppression) and political intersectionality, i.e. the translation of these social experiences into specific political claims which are marginalized by single-axis organizations and. In this repertoire strategic and punctual alliances can be made with other feminist organizations but organizational autonomy is claimed as a necessity to ensure that the political interests which derive from an intersectional location can be voiced, and heard.

(B)- A gender-first approach: universalizing, subsuming and erasing differences.

A common rationale among single axis advocacy-oriented organizations tends to subsume “other” differences under gender difference. In this case, structural intersectionality is understood in an additive manner. The argument runs as follows: some women are more discriminated against than others for various reasons but in the end they are discriminated as women, and this is what needs to be addressed. Minority women, disabled women, immigrant women, are perceived as sub-categories of a main category, “women”. Hence, the elaboration of a political interest must be focused on what is common to all women. It can include a focus on some women who are particularly discriminated against, but the overall framework is gender oppression. Hence, sub-categories do not challenge the collective identity “women” that these organizations represent, and they do not challenge the hierarchy of political interests that they identify as priorities for “women”. Eliane, a White Québécois feminist in her fifties who is employed at an independent agency for women’s rights explains:

“I think there’s generally a serious systemic discrimination against women. It’s even more exacerbated if it concerns migrant women, and we’re very concerned by this. Especially in employment. Migrant women are very much discriminated against. We’re very attentive to this. But the first cause of this discrimination, it’s because they are
women, first and foremost. And then you add to that. But if they were men, they would not experience this discrimination.”

Catherine, a White French woman in her forties who heads a French advocacy-oriented women’s rights organization, “Decide!” also suggests focusing on what’s common to all women rather than potential divisions. Reflecting on her organization’s position in favor of the 2004 law prohibiting the Muslim headscarf in French public schools she states:

“We agree [with feminists and minority women against the headscarf ban] on other things. Maybe our position is very sharp on the veil issue, but we can be allies on other issues, and the most important struggle after all, is gender equality, and it’s parity, it’s equal pay. And that’s our core lobbying, violence against women… I think that beyond the veil, we have lots of common ground on these issues which are not solved for women today. The veil is a specific issue, but there are many more important issues.”

In this case, the insistence on common causes erases minority women’s political priorities which are labeled “specific”. The focus on advocacy tends to homogenize the category “women” which is the collective subject and the raison d’être of this type of organization aspiring to represent “all” women. Julie, the young officer in charge of public relations in a French organization identifying as representing women and girls from the “projects” makes it clear in her response:

“This logic [to organize on an ethnic or national origin basis] is not ours. And I think it’s not the right way to do it. Today we are the voice of all the women who believe in the feminist conception of equality under the Republic, that’s our conception, and who
need help at one point or another, whatever their origin, their color, their sexual orientation”

However, the subsuming of differences under gender does not automatically entail exclusions in practice. As Corinne, a White French woman in her forties who heads a large French network of women’s rights groups focused on feminist advocacy and also providing some counseling services to women remarks when questioned about the concept “intersectionality”:

“No, I don’t know the term. But we take that in consideration when we do counseling. When we receive migrant women who are victims of domestic violence. Of course then we have a different analysis depending on the country they come from. … When we don’t know, because we have a very diverse workforce, we ask our colleagues, what’s going on in this country (…) Maybe it’s something [intersectionality] we do without knowing (…) So that’s also, it’s the same, you need a specific analysis. So here it is, our universalism is not completely blind and stupid.”

(C) “On her own terms”: individual recognition

The preceding quote suggests that although an organization might, in principle, put the emphasis on women’s common political interests, its feminist praxis may be more open to intersectionality than the discourse suggests. Indeed, a common feminist praxis runs through French and Canadian feminist organizations oriented towards providing counseling and services to women. This approach is based on the feminist insight that a woman should be counseled on her own terms. This feminist praxis implies refraining from judging a woman’s situation or from
imposing on her views about what is good or bad for her and recognizing the singularity of her situation. This approach implies respecting differences and recognizing their importance for the individual. These differences are not understood as shaped by structures of oppression which could form the basis of a collective political subject. On the contrary, they are conceived as embedded in a woman’s life, context and experience that must be respected so that she can, through counseling, make her own choices. Hence, the intersectional positioning of women is taken into consideration, in a pragmatic way, by the organization.

When tension linked to cultural, religious, ethnic or class differences arises between a counselor and a woman she receives, the feminist praxis of listening to women and helping her on her own terms is supposed to guarantee an inclusive approach. However, it is clearly based on the individual’s experience, not on her identity as a member of a particular group subjected, for instance, to racialization. For example, Martine, a White French woman in her forties who is one of the heads of a French feminist network of organizations dedicated to women’s health summarizes her organization’s approach in these terms:

“We’re having a hard time believing that there can be such a thing as Muslim feminists because it seems to us self-contradictory… but… we are confronted to the question of differences. For example territorial difference, when we work in the French Guinea and the French Caribbean … (…) part of the picture is about culture… but even if it’s cultural, we try to understand what’s going on for each girl, by listening to them by working with them so that they can make the tools theirs. We always start from the individual, from what she is living, not what she represents. We never enter a case through religion for example… our question is how can we give her the tools to compose her own decision, to find herself, her own balance. We don’t give her the tools, she finds
In the case of the Islamic veil, Martine admits that some counselors don’t feel comfortable with women who come to the centers wearing what they perceive as a sign of submission to men. Similarly, when young Muslim women come to the centers to ask for a false proof of their virginity so that they can get married with the approval of their family or community, the organization applies a double standard: the official position is that Women’s Health does not deliver virginity certificates because the organization does not want to encourage the perpetuation of the stigmatization of female sexuality. However, in practice there is a lot of leeway.

“For some counselors these cases are really difficult ones. There is always this tension, and it’s even more tensed for certificates of virginity. There’s a tension because it’s difficult to perceive them as alienated… it’s not right either. Some counselors are ok with it, it depends on their individual history if they can help, if they can discuss with the girls, to try to understand why they wear the veil, why they don’t, what it means for them. When a girl comes to the center veiled, it’s true it’s a real question for us. It questions feminism. This fact that a woman can accept this ideological domination… it questions us.”

This pragmatic approach is highly individualized. It depends on the counselor and it depends on each woman who comes with a story, a question, a need to be addressed. Hence inclusion is never guaranteed. It does help counselors to mediate the tensions that they experience between their own definition of the good feminist action to take (e.g. refuse religious
and patriarchal norms) and the action that is asked of them by minority women. But this repertoire of *individual recognition* does not lead practitioners to imagine that there might be collective interests based on an intersectional identity that should be included in the political platform of the organization. Moreover, this repertoire does not lead organizations to address questions of representation or inclusion of racialized women at the organizational level either. This repertoire thus promotes a praxis of difference, that can lead to individual inclusion and recognition of ethnic or religious differences, but without the “politics” element to it. Typically, while several French service-provider organizations welcome veiled women in need, they have simultaneously taken position in favor of laws banning Islamic veils in public schools, and full veils in the public space.

**(D) Intersectional solidarity**

A last repertoire emphasizes the need for single axis feminist organizations to include the political priorities of minority women and to improve their representation inside the women’s movement. Only the Women for Québec, a wide and inclusive umbrella organization, has consistently developed this repertoire and attempts to apply it in the training it offers to feminist activists and social workers, in the political agenda it promotes, and in its official discourse. Caroline, a Québécois Black employee and feminist activist in her thirties in charge of intersectionality issues, explains what intersectionality means at the WFQ:

“That’s how we ensure that when we’re looking at a problem, we haven’t forgotten half of the women. How to do an analysis that puts in perspective common struggles, because there are some common struggles, that’s the basis of the women’s movement, and that did not change with diversity. To be able to look into specificities, because it’s true that
to be, like me, a Black woman born in Québec, or to be a woman with a low skilled job, a part-time job, it’s not the same. And the same goes for being a lesbian, a woman with a disability or everything at the same time. The basis of the movement is to work on common ground. You need this double perspective, looking transversally, and at the same time looking into the specificities.”

The issue of migrant women has been high on the agenda of the WFQ. This focus has led to the elaboration of a two day training seminar on women and racism for member-organizations and a research study on migrant and racialized women’s status inside the feminist movement, asking if they are well represented or not in the movement’s organizations, if they have stable jobs in women’s rights groups, and in what type of activities they are predominantly working. Finally, migrant women’s priorities have been included on the agenda of the WFQ:

“For example, the issue of the recognition [by the Québec government] of foreign diplomas and work experiences for migrant and racialized women. It’s a very specific issue, but it’s totally consistent and linked with the analyses of the feminist movement about professional integration for women or the idea that women have their place everywhere in society.”

The ability to translate minority women’s needs and political priorities into the mainstream feminist language enables the WFQ to bridge immigration issues with broader themes of economic independence and professional achievement for women. Such a strategy both ensures that immigrant women’s interests are placed high on the political agenda of the organization, and is likely to convince non-minority women from the organization that these
issues are of importance to them as well. Also, this repertoire focuses on structures of power which situate women differently. This approach implies new political priorities for the women’s movement, but always presented as deepening or “updating” the traditional agenda rather than as conflicting objectives:

“We realize that immigration policies impact women adversely. They have more precarious jobs because they come as under the family reunification type of immigration. Globally the majority of immigrants asking for permanent residency are men, so women are totally dependent. (...) So these are important hurdles. That’s an example of how we have to update our feminist analysis, concrete feminist issues that arise when you take diversity into account.”

CONCLUSION

Intersectionality has gained recognition as the preferred concept to theorize the issue of differences among women. However, it is not always the preferred repertoire for feminist activists when they try to understand and to conceptualize the issues raised by the matrix of oppression on the ground.

The four repertoires I have described all address, in their own way, the questions raised by the literature on intersectionality. However, they do not conceive of political interests, collective identities, constituencies, and solidarities in the same manner. Some repertoires seem more apt to foster the project of an inclusive feminist political agenda than others. Two repertoires closely match the theoretical definition of intersectionality. The first, labeled *intersectional recognition*, follows the logic of political intersectionality described by Crenshaw.
It assumes that women at the intersection of various axes of domination have specific needs and political interests that are better addressed and represented by women who share a similar identity and a similar social position.

The repertoire I call intersectional solidarity is based on similar premises. It recognizes that many structural power relations impact women differently, and tries to be attentive to issues specific to minority women. The main difference is that it elaborates intersectionality from the center rather than from the margins. Whereas intersectional recognition stresses differences so as to claim for recognition, intersectional solidarity translates political claims specific to minority women into a more recognizable mainstream feminist vocabulary in order to connect those political priorities with objectives familiar to mainstream feminists.

The last two repertoires do not share many features with the concept of intersectionality but both constitute discursive tools to make sense of difference in the context of feminist practice. Advocacy-oriented organizations, especially in France, tend to conceptualize the matrix of domination in an arithmetical fashion. Differences among women create sub-categories of women, whose members are indeed vulnerable to more discriminatory practices than privileged women, but these sub-categories are subsumed under the paradigm of gender oppression. This gender first approach tends to erase differences and to ignore political claims that cannot pretend to address issues relevant for “all” women.

The fourth repertoire, used by service-providers organizations is rooted in their daily practices which aim at ensuring the individual recognition of the singularity of each woman’s experience. Activists respect or work with cultural or religious difference and it might lead their organizations to respond to the specific needs of minority women on their own terms, but it is less likely to lead to a better representation of their needs and interests at the level of the
organization or of the political priorities of the women’s movement.

Finally, the stark contrast between Canada and France sheds light on the importance that the broader political context, in particular narratives of nation-building, immigration and secularism, as well as each movement’s history play in shaping the dynamics of intersectionality. The tendency of Canadian organization to essentialize cultural differences reflects the dominant narrative of multiculturalism, while the tendency of French organizations to subsume or disregard ethnic differences mirrors the dominant republican imperative to ignore processes of racialization. This suggests that in both contexts women’s organizations must find new resources, in particular alternative narratives of feminist identity detached from nationalist projects, to forge new repertoires of inclusion to address the issues raised by intersectionality.

References:


Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the


Kergoat, Danièle. 2000. “Division sexuelle du travail et rapports sociaux de sexe”. In
_Dictionnaire critique du féminisme_, edited by Helena Hirata, Paris: PUF.

Korteweg, Anna C. 2008. The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam and Representations of

Immigrant Women’s Activism and the Voice of Difference. *Journal of International Women’s
Studies* 10(4): 65-84.

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lamont, Michèle, and Laurent Thévenot. 2000. Introduction: Towards a Renewed Comparative
in France and the United States*, edited by Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lamont, Michèle, Grégoire Mallard and Joshua Guetzkow. 2009. Fairness as Appropriateness.
Negotiating Epistemological Differences in Peer-Review. *Science, Technology and Human
Value*, 34(5):573-606

Lawston, Jodie M. 2009. We’re All Sisters’: Bridging and Legitimacy in the Women’s

Lépinard, Eléonore. 2010. In the Name of Equality? The missing intersection in Canadian
feminists' legal mobilization against multiculturalism" *American Behavioral Scientist's*,
53(12): 1763-1787

Lesselier, Claudie. 2007. Pour une histoire des mouvements de femmes de l’immigration en


*Nouvelles questions féministes*. 2006. special issue “Sexisme et racisme: le cas français”. 25(1).


Table 1:

The Distribution of Organizations in the Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single Axis</td>
<td>Dual Axes</td>
<td>Single Axis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service-Based</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The numbers in this column represent the absolute number of organizations interviewed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repertoires</th>
<th>Distinctive Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>On Our Own Terms</strong></td>
<td>The representatives of women’s interests have to share similar identity with the women they represent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender First</strong></td>
<td>Any women can represent the interests of all women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On Her Own Terms</strong></td>
<td>Representatives do not have to share similar identity with the women they represent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intersectional Solidarity</strong></td>
<td>Representatives of intersectional groups must be included in the mainstream movement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While quite consistent over time and across policy-fields, the Canadian multiculturalist doctrine has not been totally adopted by the province of Québec. Québec implements similar antidiscrimination and color-conscious schemes, however, its discourse on immigrant integration relies on a mix of multiculturalist and civic principles, stressing the importance of French language and common values (Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

The English term intersection can be translated in French with different words, *intersection* (referring to roads or geometry), or *croisement* (referring mostly to roads). Following this dual translation, intersectionality can be translated in francophone feminist scholarship by *intersectionalité*, as well as by *entrecroisement* (referring to threads and weaving much like the English term crisscross).

See the special issue of the French feminist journal *Cahiers du Genre* (2005) as well as special issues of *Nouvelles questions féministes* (2006)

The official list for Québec compiles over a hundred organizations, including small community centers, theatre troupes, professional associations (e.g. business women from Montréal, Montréal female professors or care givers), shelters and advocacy groups. However a large share of these organizations did not match the requirements to be interviewed.

Only one organization was mentioned in the French interviews that I was not able to interview as well. Given the small number of French organizations that could be identified (and self identified) as dual-axes organizations I also included in the French sample a feminist organization representing lesbians of colors, hence with a triple-axes identity.

Individuals’ and organizations’ names were changed to ensure anonymity.