

Border Checkpoints at the Nodes of Intersection

Challenges Facing Intersectional Feminism in the GCC

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When Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualized the term ‘intersectionality,’ she used the metaphorical imagery of traffic, roads, road-forks and crossroads. Navigating through these roads and detouring through them, women from minority groups were subjected to stop signs and each stop represented a form of oppression that she either had to overcome through struggle and strife or be asked to turn back and return to either the previous stop sign or start from the beginning. Cutting through all routes, Crenshaw claimed that ‘racism’ represented the highway connecting all routes but I would argue that classism also runs a parallel highway to racism and gender is the bridge connecting both highways. Thus these are three major and most common forms of oppression found in any discursive intersectional critique before branching out into other forms of oppression. That’s why to truly operate on an intersectional plane, one has to visualize nodal points that act as connectors for coalitions and alliances against multi-layered forms of oppression and inequalities in relation to power structures.

It was in this vein, of thinking of the nodal points and highways, avenues, crossroads that made me rethink the notion of intersectionality. Intersectionality, as broad and unbounded as the term itself is, brings forth a challenge at the very axis of intersection or at precisely the nodal point connecting one form of oppression to another. At the intersection, I began thinking of the possibility of the emergence of borders and checkpoints, not only what Crenshaw claimed to be stop signs but micro-checkpoints emerging between the nodes by the oppressed themselves. The emergence of these checkpoints may block the flow of traffic with the risk of effacing one signifier in favour of the another, e.g. migrant versus gender where the checkpoints reify the signifiers instead of allowing them to flow freely and establish through the flow strong coalitions. What inspired my thinking was the theme **Borders and Boundaries** that the [Centre of Freudian Analysis and Research](#) (CFAR) adopted for this year. In a roundtable entitled: Dehumanizing the Other, Darian Leader, founding member of CFAR, stated that borders and boundaries are created to keep the other at bay, to establish a form of distance and one of the key enablers of borders and boundaries is the notion of “de-humanization.” Through dehumanizing the other, one rationalizes mistreatment, abuse, discrimination and even murder.

Segregation by means of physical geographical borders and immigration checkpoints between countries is founded upon the dehumanization of the other. If we extend the notion of borders to social, economic, and household divisions, we will see formations of borders manifest in our day to day in institutions such the state, legislation, trade unions, activist groups, workplace and within the family. Let’s push borders and boundaries even further, how do intrapsychic borders formulate in intersubjective relations? That is, how do we use or employ our fantasies, desires and affects to dehumanize, negate, disavow or affirm the other? And finally, how do these borders emerge at the axes of intersectional nodal points?

I do not intend to answer these questions inasmuch as open them up for contemplation, contestation, for analysis and reflection, and for investigation that would contribute to piecing together the multiple fragmentations that may inevitably arise when one hastily and eagerly attempts to adopt intersectionality as a movement and inadvertently create borders at the axes of intersections rendering the marginalized further into marginalization. Intersectionality must not be used synonymously with inclusion, as the rights discourse sometimes falls into that trap. *Categorical attributes are often used for the construction of inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries that differentiate between self and other, determining what is ‘normal’ and what is not, who is entitled to certain resources and who is not, (Yuval-Davis, 2006), Or more succinctly put: “A fantasy of inclusion is a technique of exclusion,” (Ahmed, 2017).*

I began this essay by very briefly introducing the challenges that will face the establishment of an intersectional movement as a way to acknowledge the complexities and entanglements that will no doubt arise structurally, politically and intersubjectively. Such challenges will emerge when the attempt to establish an intersectional movement in the GCC especially if structural, social and systematic racist, sexist and classist conditioning is introjected and unaddressed.

To illustrate, I will zero-in to Kuwait where intersectional feminism is beginning to weave its way into the discourse through academics and activists. To posit the challenges that will determine the efficacy of an intersectional approach to feminism, I will use Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs) as a group set to illustrate what lies ahead. MDWs wholly encompass the concepts of borders and dehumanization. Structural dehumanization commences at start of the migration chain in the home country where MDWs internalize subordination. This is coupled with introjecting prohibition once they are assigned an employer and down the line it becomes detrimental to their self-concept and self-worth. Consequently, more borders are established rendering notions such as empowerment quite difficult to achieve. The introjection of borders also governs the employer who upon receiving the MDW already distances him or herself from this dehumanized other, making it impossible to communicate with the MDW as an equal human being.

The Case of Migrant Domestic Workers in Kuwait

There are over 700,000 [migrant domestic workers](#) in Kuwait, that is a fifth of the population, and a quarter of the labour market and women make up almost 63%. Governed by the hegemonic Kafala system and controlled by the global capitalist division of labour, MDWs are structurally oppressed, dehumanized, exploited and their maltreatment is rationalized. Kafala as a system reinscribes the power of borders and draws the boundaries both in public and private spheres. Tied to one employer (Kafil), MDWs lose their agency through the confiscation of their passports upon arrival, potential high risk of not receiving their already low wages, and their confinement inside the borders of the house limits their access to networks, communities, ability to access justice. All of this is interlocked with language barrier as a major border as the majority of MDWs come from South Asian and African countries. Therefore, the three major forms of oppression aforementioned are already ontologically embedded. Within the private sphere where they live and work, they are annexed to the family only in their capacity to be of service.

Bell Hooks illustrated the segregation between members of marginalized groups in relation to those in the center which can be appropriated to MDWs: "to be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside of the main body." MDWs operate as part of the whole household but are excluded when the service is complete and retreat back to their margins, in silence and even when they are operating in the center, they are invisible because they have already been dehumanized structurally even prior to arrival at the country of destination. This structural dehumanization results in a perpetual mechanism of disavowal. Disavowal is not the same as denial or rejection, but it is a claim that refuses to recognize belonging (Bensalama, 2009). This refusal to recognize belonging creates intra-psychical borders and reinforces the master-slave dialectic when an encounter happens with the other and here we begin to see sub-formations of oppression branching from the major ones.

Over the past decade however, MDWs in Kuwait began organizing organically with the initial objective of creating a community. This community began to develop and soon became an integrated and comprehensive association attracting the attention of both local civil society organizations (CSOs) and international organizations such as the ILO and the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). Known as Sandigan Kuwait, the association began with the vision of the founder Ann Abunda to empower MDWs to know their rights and to obtain them. Initially, Sandigan Kuwait catered to the Filipina community but today it has opened its doors to all migrant communities. The Ethiopian domestic workers' community was formed earlier this year with the guidance of Sandigan Kuwait. Today, the activities of Sandigan Kuwait include skills training for reintegration in home country, mental health support, leadership and negotiation skills and much more impressive activities.

When I met with Sandigan last year, I began to question as to why for example, in campaigns that call for ending violence against women, MDWs – who are persistently exposed to the trauma of violence – were not part of such campaigns, given that the work they have done in terms of organizing and community belonging outdoes most of the initiatives done by local CSOs. Unfortunately, the majority of feminist movements in the GCC remain in their ivory towers and their campaigning does not extend beyond their class. These women groups, for example, promote the need for financial independency for women as a form of empowerment, disregarding the fact that their own economic empowerment comes at the price of the other's disempowerment as with the case of MDWs whose work is undervalued. Thus, disavowing

the other becomes internalized for fear of loss of their material and class privilege or in Lacanian terms, the fear of being symbolically castrated.

Demolishing the Borders

One CSO, however, took the initiative to challenge such borders residing at the axes of intersections. En.v partnered with the ILO to promote deeper collaboration between local CSOs and migrant community organizations through a focus on addressing shared challenges through community meetups. The first meetup took place in November 2021 focusing on the theme of mental health and wellbeing in Kuwait Post-Covid. This was the first of its kind where local CSOs not only attended to listen to migrant workers presenting but to actually engage in activities and workgroups. The first layer of the veil was lifted, as local CSOs listened to the challenges and difficulties faced by MDWs, while MDWs felt empowered and brave to speak up. The real challenge, however, is to move beyond empathy and to break the intrapsychic borders through uniting to form coalitions against oppressive power structures, to demolish the borders where structural dehumanization lurks, and to continue with regular meetups to listen and speak so that through language the borders will be demolished.

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