Developments in the appropriation of intersectionality by white feminism in European policy

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The Black feminist theory of intersectionality has fuelled critiques of siloed equality policy developed from the experiences of, and to serve the interests of, those who are disadvantaged in relation to one marker of inequality but privileged in relation to others. European gender equality policy is an important case in point, developed this way because intersectionally marginalised women (for example, Black women and women of colour) have been largely excluded from policy spaces, so the resulting hegemonic approach to inequalities has been to privilege a singular approach to gender. While dominant actors in the European gender equality arena not long ago explicitly voiced resistance and opposition to work on inequalities other than gender (Jacquot, 2015) and to intersectionality, this position is becoming less tenable: ‘without an intersectional approach … the women’s movement will lack credibility’ (European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2020). The term ‘intersectionality’ is increasingly mobilised in European gender equality policy debates. However, here, the challenge of intersectionality is, antithetically, reduced to seeking to make gender equality policy ‘more intersectional’. Moreover, the particular and ongoing whitened, additive and depoliticised way in which intersectionality is being appropriated across different realms of European policy requires careful attention.

The dominant constructed narrative concerning intersectionality in relation to European gender equality policy is that it is a ‘new’ theory that presents challenges to older ways of theorising and legislating on social inequalities – yet, ideas of intersectionality have a long tradition in Europe (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019). Equality policy developed in siloed ways not because intersectionality was a theory unknown to political actors of the time, but because siloed structures reflect the experiences and interests of dominant groups. In the UK, for example, where legislation concerning racial inequalities preceded legislation on gender, some white women parliamentarians wanted ‘sex’ and race to be separate, and made arguments promoting the idea that they are mutually exclusive, resting on racist beliefs in
white superiority (Christoffersen, 2021a). The development of this legislation and its counterparts in other European countries was closely related to developments in the European arena, where a unitary concept of gender, based on a universalised white, middle-class, cisgender, non-disabled, heterosexual experience has been the privileged focal point of equality policy (see also Lombardo and Verloo, 2009). The more recent expansion of equality policy to include areas other than gender has been resisted by organised groups of predominantly white women, such as the European Women’s Lobby (Jacquot, 2015; Lombardo and Verloo, 2009), which considered gender to be more important than other inequalities.

Indeed, in 2009, Emanuela Lombardo and Mieke Verloo (2009: 484) noted that in the European Union gender equality policy arena, ‘intersectionality has not really been on the agenda at all’. That landscape is shifting, but it is important to carefully interrogate the meanings given to intersectionality and the way that it has been taken up. In 2020, the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men published an ‘Opinion on intersectionality in gender equality laws, policies and practices’, in which intersectionality is used as an add-on to gender, where gender is considered as the most important marker of inequality: ‘experiences and positions in society are influenced by gender as well other social categories’ (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2019, as cited in European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2020: emphasis added). The document seeks to ‘develop an intersectional approach to gender equality action and tackle intersectional discrimination (involving gender as one of the discriminated grounds)’ and asks: ‘how can we ensure that gender equality policies lead to substantive equality for all?’ (European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2020). Consistent with other observations of how intersectionality is emptied of attention to race in Europe (Lewis, 2013), race and racism are not mentioned. The document is more concerned to assert that intersectionality can be subsumed into gender than it is to actually engage intersectionality: ‘increased attention to the experiences of women in minority groups does not mean a diffusion of the focal point for action for the women’s movement, which remains … gender’ (European Commission Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, 2020). Yet, in an intersectional approach, the relevance of gender cannot be assumed: ‘the importance of any category or structure (e.g. socioeconomic status, race, or gender) cannot be predetermined; the categories and their importance must be discovered in the process of investigation’ (Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery, 2019: 7). Similar subsumption of intersectionality to gender can be observed in the current drive for ‘inclusive gender equality’ in the European Commission’s Directorate General for Research and Innovation (European Commission, 2020). While the challenge of intersectionality is urgent, in European gender policy debates, increasing mobilisation of the term masks what remains the main concern: the reassertion of the primary importance of gender – a use of intersectionality that is necessarily additive (Christoffersen, 2021b).

Notes

1 ‘Siloed’ is used to mean the way that equality issues are addressed by isolated movements, organisations, laws, policies, institutions and funding programmes.

2 Except in direct quotations and references.
Author biography

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References