Intersectionality helps us to recognise that people experience the world differently based on their overlapping identity markers.

During the month of August, different Women’s Month campaigns were run across the country to raise awareness on issues such as gender-based violence (GBV), inequality, and discrimination that continue to affect women. While these campaigns are necessary and impactful, can the theory of intersectionality help to ensure that efforts made to tackle the injustices and inequalities towards women do not just end up perpetuating structures of inequality and oppression?

Research by Professor Amanda Gouws, holder of the DSI-NRF South African Research Chair in Gender Politics hosted at Stellenbosch University, looked at the concept of intersectionality and its relevance in South Africa using the student protests as an example.

What is Intersectionality?
Intersectionality relates to how different identities such as race, gender, class, disability, sexuality and others overlap with each other to create mutually dependent systems of oppression and discrimination. It helps us to recognise that people experience the world differently based on their overlapping identity markers and that all identities that can marginalise people must be considered.

The concept of intersectionality was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the problems that black women experience with the law. She argued that it is the experiences of black men (race) that determine the considerations of anti-racist strategies and the experiences of white women (gender) that foregrounded the Women’s Movement. On both counts, the specificity of black women’s experiences is made invisible.

Intersectionality and Feminism
In feminist literature and theory, intersectionality was initially used to critique the essentialism of second >>
wave feminist theory that prioritised gender as the only identity marker to explain, for example, that all women experience discrimination or oppression in the same way.

Intersectionality became a corrective of this type of essentialism, giving recognition that women are not homogenous and all identity markers, including lived experience of power and privilege, must be prioritised in order to understand everyone’s unique experiences of discrimination and oppression.

Therefore, without an intersectional lens, systems of oppression will continue due to the interlocked relations of dominance; social, political, cultural and economic dynamics; and power, which are multiplied and determined simultaneously and referred to as a ‘matrix of domination’.

**Intersectionality in the Fallist Hashtag Campaign**

When the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests started, it was black African students presenting their exclusion from the racist and white institutional culture as a racial form of othering. The students challenged the institutions’ status quo, drawing on a black consciousness tradition theorised inter alia by Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon. Race was the central identity construct that was at the forefront in the first months of the hashtag campaigns.

The focus on gender became a necessity when an African woman student was raped in the administration building that was occupied by the #RhodesMustFall students at UCT. Consequently, the first cracks in the solidarity with black men started to show and intensified when the Rhodes University Reference List that accused 11 male students at Rhodes University of rape was published.

Foregrounding gender in the protests, attention was drawn to the experiences of African women students at the University, the construction of masculinities and its involvement with gender-based violence. This culminated in the #EndRapeCulture campaign, which was foregrounded on race, gender and sexuality and the dynamic and fluid relations among them. African women mobilised around pervasive gender-based violence and institutional cultures that normalise this violence. African women and LGBTQI students’ naked bodies were visible in the protests as a way of resisting their sexualisation. The naked black/queer/trans body was used to claim back body autonomy and invert the colonial gaze of the “hypersexual” African woman or the “unAfrican” queer body (At UCT, transgender students undressed to resist the voyeuristic gaze of an art exhibition on the trans body at the university).

**Why This Research Matters?**

Intersectionality and the matrix of domination are useful concepts that can be used to understand how relations of power situate people embodying different identities in relation to each other to allow domination and oppression. Thus, in order to tackle and end violence against women, the anti-gender based violence strategies must be intersectional to address experiences of women and how violence differs between groups of women and among LGBTQI- and trans-identities.

**Anti-gender based violence strategies must address how violence differs between groups of women and among LGBTQI and trans-identities**