

**INTERSECTIONALITY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK  
TO STUDY MIGRANT WORKERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE  
WITH INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL POSITIONING**

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**Abstract**

Intersectionality depicts the intricate interplay of various social categorizations in shaping the experiences of individuals or communities rather than single categorization alone. This article attempts to introduce intersectionality as an essential theoretical framework for research and analysis of migrant workers' lived experience with social inequalities, and at the same time, their social positionings. Initially a critique of academic feminism from a Black activist and more inclusive perspective, intersectionality has been quickly adopted by researchers from other fields as a framework due to its usefulness in researching inequalities. By tracing intersectionality back to the context where Crenshaw coined the term, together with the presentation of its key proponents and analyses of two case studies, this article hopes to shed light on the way intersectionality can be an essential tool to explore the way migrant workers employ their multiple and intersecting identities to seek upward social mobility.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, migrant workers, social mobility, migration

**Discipline:** cultural anthropology

**Absztrakt**

AZ INTERSEKACIONALITÁS MINT ELMÉLETI KERET A MIGRÁNS MUNKAVÁLLALÓK EGYENLŐTLENSÉGEKKEL ÉS TÁRSADALMI POZICIONÁLÁSSAL KAPCSOLATOS TAPASZTALATAINAK TANULMÁNYOZÁSÁHOZ

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Az interszekcionalitás a különféle társadalmi kategorizálások bonyolult kölcsönhatását ábrázolja az egyének vagy közösségek tapasztalatainak alakításában. Jelen tanulmány megkísérli bevezetni az interszekcionalitást, mint alapvető elméleti keretet a migráns munkavállalók társadalmi egyenlőtlenségekkel kapcsolatos megélt tapasztalatainak, és egyben társadalmi pozícióinak kutatásához és elemzéséhez. Az interszekcionalitás kezdetben az akadémikus feminizmus fekete aktivista és befogadóbb perspektívájú kritikája volt, majd gyorsan átvették más területek kutatói is elméleti keretként, mivel hasznos volt az egyenlőtlenségek kutatásában. Jelen tanulmány az interszekcionalitást visszavezeti a Crenshaw által megalkotott kontextusra az elmélet fő támogatóinak bemutatásával és két esettanulmány elemzésével. A tanulmány rávilágít arra, hogy hogyan lehet az interszekcionalitás alapvető eszköz annak feltárásához, hogy a migráns munkavállalók hogyan alkalmazzák többszörös és egymást keresztező identitásukat a felfelé irányuló társadalmi mobilitás érdekében.

**Kulcsszavak:** interszekcionalitás, migráns munkavállalók, társadalmi mobilitás, migráció

**Diszciplína:** kulturális antropológia

### **Intersectionality: Key Components and Background**

Intersectionality, rooted in feminist sociology, emerged notably through the pioneering work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It depicts the intricate interplay of various social categorizations such as gender and race in shaping the experiences of individuals or communities (Cooper, Brittney 2016). These intersecting factors intertwine to form overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Initially, intersectionality functioned as a critique of academic feminism from a Black, activist, and more inclusive perspective (e.g., Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Crenshaw, 1989; Lutz, 2014). Scholars such as Moraga and Anzaldúa however expanded the concept for other fields, namely anthropology, and included other categorizations (Ngeh and Pelican, 2018). Black activists, as well as Latina, post-colonial, queer and Indigenous scholars have all produced work that reveals the intricate interplay between social categorizations and processes that shape human lives (Bunjun, 2010; Collins, 1990; Valdes, 1997; Van Herk, Smith, & Andrew, 2011). While there remains a

lack of consensus on the definition of intersectionality (Wynn, 2020), its key proponents agree that members of minority groups face inequalities in varying configurations and degrees of intensity.

According to Hankivsky (2014), intersectionality features the following key components: first and foremost, it recognizes that individuals possess multiple social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) that intersect and interact with one another. Given human lives are multi-dimensional and complex, lived realities are shaped by different social factors and social dynamics operating together rather than by single categories alone. Moreover, people can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously, depending on social contexts. Intersectionality also suggests that the way certain groups, especially those with overlapping marginalized identities, may be overlooked or marginalized within dominant discourses and frameworks. This invisibility can perpetuate systemic inequalities and hinder efforts to address social injustices. Additionally, Hankivsky highlighted that relationships and power dynamics between social configurations and processes (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, sexism) are linked. Given how

power operates within social systems and structures, intersectionality explores the way intersecting identities shape social actors' experiences of privilege and oppression; it emphasizes the importance of recognizing and challenging systems of privilege and oppression to achieve social equality. Multi-level analyses that link individual experiences to broader structures and systems are crucial for revealing how power relations are shaped and experienced. Intersectionality also underscores the impact of structural factors such as institutional discrimination and systemic inequalities, in shaping social actors' access to opportunities. It shows how different social identities can intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization and disadvantage.

Finally, intersectionality is explicitly oriented toward transformation, building cooperation among different groups, and working toward social equality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw first introduced the term *intersectionality* in her 1989's notable work, "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*." This paper was published in a legal journal, and Crenshaw herself was, and still is, a legal scholar. The United States at the time was experiencing a growing number of automotive plants where a substantial workforce was necessary, they however tended to only hire white (most appropriately Caucasian women) women for secretarial and administrative positions, and Black (most appropriately men of African descent) men for manufacturing and floor works. This phenomenon left Black women who sought employment in a difficult position because they could not compete with members of other social categories for employment, and even if they landed a position, it would have been a challenge for them to earn promotions. Employers generally dismissed complaints regarding the situation with the rationale that it was neither an issue of gender or race, for women as a whole and Black people as a whole

were not discriminated against by any means (Wynn, 2020).

Having studied the cases from the 1970s and 1980s, Crenshaw noticed a gap in the legal system that overlooked the experience of Black women, and this is where she coined the term intersectionality to address the „*double discrimination*” that Black women were facing (Crenshaw, 1991). To use her words in the paper: „Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.”

Crenshaw employed the concept of intersectionality to illustrate the complex realities of Black women, who faced discrimination not solely due to their race (Black) or gender (woman) alone, but at the intersection of both identities (Black+woman). This intersection gave rise to unique forms of oppression that were frequently overlooked within conventional feminist and antiracist analyses. Despite Crenshaw being a legal scholar and how she devised intersectionality as a legal framework to understand the way members of minority groups experience inequalities, it is evident that the title of her work indicated that this framework would also be useful for feminist and antiracist theories and practices (Wynn, 2020).

Prior to Crenshaw, intersectionality was not entirely novel (Wynn, 2020). Numerous ideas at the time were already emerging to address issues relating to Black feminism. American writer and professor Audre Lorde once mentioned that „there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (from Audre Lorde's 1982 speech, *Learning from the 60s*). Or for instance, the following paragraph from

The Combahee River Collective Statement: „The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (CR Collective, 1977: The Combahee River Collective Statement).

Sharing similar sentiments with the two mentioned examples, the idea to combat inequalities by studying multiple social categories, rather than just one, was not entirely new. In the context of the United States during the 1960s, Black women found themselves experiencing sexism and racism when involved in the civil rights and women’s liberation movements, respectively.

Black women also found that in both cases, the primary issues from those movements were not necessarily the ones that were of cardinal importance and relevance to them (Wynn, 2020). Taking from the moment Crenshaw coined a term to facilitate the understanding of the double discrimination in the lived experiences of Black women, intersectionality was then quickly adopted by researchers from other fields as a framework due to its usefulness in researching inequalities (Ngeh and Pelican, 2018).

While most intersectional analyses have predominantly centered around gender, class, ethnicity, and race, there may also be additional categories depending on social contexts (Nash, 2008; Osanami and Ngeh, 2017). In recent years, intersectionality has even become a relevant approach in migration studies (Anthias, 2012; Bastia, 2014).

### **Intersectionality in Researching Migrant Workers**

High-income countries have shown themselves to be attractive locations for migrants to pursue

incomes or career opportunities better than in their home countries (Langedijk, 2023). This phenomenon resulted in the diverse backgrounds of workers migrating to high-income countries. Migrants’ educational achievements range from none to post-academic degrees (Blanpain, 2005) and thus result in varying degrees of treatment. In the case of domestic workers in many countries in the Middle East, there even exists a racial hierarchy revolving around who gets hired and who does not. Incidents of migrant exploitation raise concerns about unfair treatment of migrants stemming from their diverse backgrounds such as countries, cultures, and socio-economic statuses.

To understand the migrant workers’ experience with inequality is to possess skills that enable researchers to thoroughly understand how the migrants’ multiple and intersecting social identities come at play. Intersectionality allows researchers to analyze the complex and multifaceted nature of migrant workers’ experiences, considering how factors such as gender, race, and class intersect to shape their access to employment, wages, working conditions, and social integration, and thus has rendered itself an essential framework to study migrant workers.

Additionally, intersectionality prioritizes the experiences and viewpoints of marginalized communities, including migrant workers who encounter intersecting forms of oppression (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2023, 65.). Through integrating intersectional methodologies into research, scholars can amplify the voices of migrant workers and identify the challenges they face. Intersectionality also sheds light on structural inequities, including discrimination in the labor market, immigration policies, and social marginalization, and in shaping the experiences of migrant workers.

By studying the intersection of different systems of injustice, researchers gain insight into the systemic hurdles that migrant workers face, and at the same time, advocate for policy reforms to make

them better. The employment of an intersectional approach in research can lead to the development of more effective and fairer interventions and policies for migrant workers (Dag Hammarskjold Foundation, 2023, 65.).

By understanding the intersection of identities and structural inequalities, policymakers can tailor initiatives to tackle existing obstacles and promote the rights and well-being of migrant workers.

On the other hand, there exists a lack of studies that delve into the way migrant workers actively employ their multiple and intersecting identities to pursue upward social mobility (Ngeh and Pelican 2018). Lutz (2015) contended that social actors do not endure disadvantages and social constraints alone but also actively make use of their multiple identities to enhance their social positionings. Implementing from the methodological proposals of Anthias (2012) and Lutz (2014), in a study that explores the experience of African migrant workers in Dubai, Ngeh and Pelican (2018) contend that African migrants flexibly employ their intersecting positionalities, in particular ethnicity, nationality, race, and gender, to renegotiate their place in the segregated UAE economy and seek upward professional and social mobility.

This is one of the few studies that strategize an intersectional approach to not only identify different vectors of inequalities, but also to illustrate the way inter-secting identities can become a powerful tool for migrant workers to negotiate their social positionings.

### **Intersectional Analyses of Migrant Workers' Lived Experience**

Intersectional analyses on the migrant workers' complex interactions of identity and experience involve a nuanced examination of how multiple and intersecting social identities can shape their lived realities. This part of the article will attempt

to suggest a step-by-step guide for an intersectional analysis:

*Identifying Intersecting Identities:* researchers identify the diverse social identities present within the migrant worker's communities. These identities may include social categories such as nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, age, religion, language proficiency, educational background, legal status, and occupation. The identified factors vary from individual to individual, all contingent on circumstances. Researchers may face combinations of multiple social categories at once where they often intersect and interact with one another to shape migrant workers' lived experiences with migration, employment, social integration, and access to resources and opportunities.

*Exploring Structural Power Dynamics:* researchers analyze the power dynamics inherent in intersecting social identities within the context of migration. This involves examining how factors such as race, gender, legal status, and socioeconomic backgrounds intersect to render the migrant workers' vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and marginalization. For instance, when studying domestic migrant workers in the Middle East, one should focus on the social hierarchy between the sponsor and the sponsored, which functions under the form of the Kafala sponsorship system (a sponsorship system for migrants who want to work in several Middle Eastern countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan).

The racial hierarchy among domestic workers where Filipina migrants are the most desired, while African domestic workers remain the least (Ngeh and Pelican 2018), should also be well studied because it helps dismantle a system of injustice that thrives on the expense of the migrant workers. By exploring the power dynamics between the social actors, researchers may be able to identify inequalities expressed through multiple and intersecting social categories.

*Contextualizing Social Inequalities:* researchers contextualize the intersecting identities of migrant workers within broader sociopolitical and economic contexts. In particular, they will consider how structural inequalities, institutional discrimination, migration policies, and global economic forces shape the migrant workers' experiences and opportunities in their host countries. Contextualizing social inequalities enables researchers to see the bigger picture which helps identify the roots of social inequalities (Hankivsky, 2014).

*Identifying Patterns and Themes:* researchers examine the migrant workers' lived experiences to identify patterns and themes that shape their realities. From these findings, we can reflect on our own positionality and biases throughout the research process. Researchers can then critically examine how their own intersecting identities may influence their interpretations of migrant workers' experiences and shape their interactions with research participants.

By analyzing the complex interactions of identity and experience among migrant workers through an intersectional lens, researchers gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted ways in which migration intersects with other social factors to shape individuals' lives. This nuanced understanding can inform more inclusive and effective policies, programs, and interventions to support migrant workers and address the systemic inequalities they face.

In the following part of the paper, I will present two case studies and attempt to analyze them using an intersectional approach to illustrate how intersectionality is an essential framework to study migrant workers' lived experiences.

#### **Case study 1: Tanko advancing from security to real estate**

In their paper titled *Intersectionality and the Labour Market in the United Arab Emirates*, Pelican and Ngeh (2018) documented the way a Cameroonian man, Tanko, strategically employed his multiple identities to advance from security to real estate. In

Cameroon, Tanko worked in the secretariat of various state establishments for almost five years before his departure to Dubai to “*seek greener pastures.*” In this Gulf country, Tanko was working for a security company with a humble salary and therefore attempted to seek other jobs that pay better wages. Limited by his educational background and experience, Tanko failed to land a job in real estate. Later on, Tanko managed to stay in touch with an Indian real estate broker who frequented the luxury apartment tower where he worked and was introduced to the broker's boss under the pretext of him “*also being a Black man.*” The boss turned out to share the same nationality as Tanko, Cameroonian, and assigned Tanko tasks as a form of job examination. Tanko managed to complete the tasks more than successfully and landed a position at the boss' real estate company. Under the Emirati *kafala* sponsorship system, which involves paying a certain amount of money to the current employer for the termination of the current contract, Tanko found himself struggling to pay the fees. After having discussed with the apartment owner, who happened to be an Egyptian Muslim, Tanko managed to terminate his current contract as the apartment owner offered to lend him some money because “*I am African too.*” At the real estate company, Tanko excelled at his new job and was promoted to branch manager after a year. At the point of the interview, there were already seven real estate brokers working under Tanko, most of whom came from minority backgrounds. From this case study of Tanko, it is visible that he had effectively employed his multiple and intersecting social identities (e.g. Black, African, man, etc.) to pursue upward social mobility in the UAE (Ngeh and Pelican, 2018). With the *kafala* sponsorship system notorious for limiting social actors' rights and mobility (Ngeh and Pelican, 2018), it is remarkable that Tanko was able to defy the system by implementing the very social categorizations that could have been otherwise used against him.

Applying an intersectional approach to study the case of Tanko, Ngeh and Pelican (2018) first identified his multiple and intersecting identities such as Black, African, Cameroonian, etc., and then proceeded to dissect the context of migrant workers working in Gulf countries by citing multiple studies on the topic. In particular, Ngeh and Pelican highlighted several names of scholars whose works explore the role of ethnicity, nationality, and race as structuring features of Gulf labor markets (Ewers and Dicce, 2016; Nagy 2006; Mahdavi 2011; Vora 2008), and then the study of Malit and Tchiapep (2013) on how African migrant workers face more structural disadvantages in finding adequate employments in Dubai. According to their studies, the common occupations for African migrants in Dubai are in security services and frontline hospitality (e.g., doormen, reception staff, waiters, shop assistants, etc.) which offer poor wages and limited opportunities for professional advancement. Wages are generally linked to the migrant workers' nationalities, which put African migrants towards the bottom end of the hierarchy. The case of Tanko stands out for Ngeh and Pelican because despite significant disadvantages, there exist ways for African migrant workers to negotiate their way to secure well-paid white-collar professions (Ngeh and Pelican, 2018). This is to say that by employing an intersectional approach, Ngeh and Pelican succeeded in the discovery of more findings that support their hypotheses regarding the case of African migrant workers in Dubai. Particularly, they shed light on how being Black or African or Cameroonian can be advantageous in situations where it is possible to evoke sympathy and solidarity on the basis of shared social identities. This finding supports a conclusion from their previous study on how alienation and discrimination against foreigners appear to promote the need for solidarity between foreign migrants (Ngeh 2011:107).

### **Case study 2: Myla employing her East Asian identity to start a K-pop (Korean Pop Music Culture) business**

In my previous publication concerning the kafala sponsorship system in Jordan (Tran, 2023), I had Chinese migrant worker Myla serving as a case study to support the idea, echoing the hypotheses of Ngeh and Pelican, that the migrant workers can effectively implement their intersecting identities to pursue upward social mobility despite visible disadvantages. In this paper, I will present the case of Myla again with a better focus on how to dissect her case utilizing the proposed intersectional approach.

During my trip to Jordan to conduct the fieldwork for my master thesis in 2020, I met Myla, a twenty-six-year-old woman from Chongqing, China. She was a member of the Jordan K-pop Lovers community (JKL) where young people living in Amman meet to share and discuss their interest in Korean Pop Music. Myla arrived to Jordan in 2016 “*out of boredom*” as a way to avoid her mother because “*she is very controlling and makes my life miserable.*” Back in Chongqing, Myla attended Chongqing Jiaotong University for three semesters studying Business Administration before dropping out, for attending college was never her wish but rather her mother's. With the help of a relative, Myla made her way to Jordan to work in an Asian grocery store in Jabal Amman. Based on the nature of the Kafala-influenced sponsorship system in Jordan, Myla is tied to her employer in terms of legal status and mobility. In theory, her employer could have possessed total control over her work mobility, social life, or even confiscated her passport (though prohibited by laws), Myla was nevertheless given the freedom after work and was neither exploited nor physically and mentally abused like many migrant workers in Jordan. “*...oh my boss is also Chinese, he is super cute and lets me do*

*whatever I want. We Chinese are supposed to take care of each other you know.”*

Myla became a member of a local K-Pop community in 2019 and actively participated in nearly all of the offline events of community. Reflecting on her experience, Myla noted that making friends was *'extremely easy'* and attributed this success to her identity as an Asian woman, given the notable female composition of the community, *...you know what's interesting? Everyone in these meetings just wants to talk to me, probably because I am Asian, and it is the closest thing to K-pop they could ever find here...”*

Myla became popular in the JFL community quickly. With the connections newly established, Myla started her own business where she purchases K-Pop merchandise such as CDs, posters, and K-Pop-themed accessories from China and distributes them to her friends in Amman. These purchases are then transported to Jordan together with the products from the grocery store as part of an agreement with her employer. With K-Pop grows exponentially in its popularity, Myla's business has only thrived ever since. She no longer works for the grocery shop but nevertheless still pays her employer monthly fees (to cover her tax duties in Jordan), and this very transaction is what has kept her stay in Jordan legal. It is even more significant to mention that her employer does not ask for any additional fees and offers to transfer Myla's purchases from China for free because they are *„both Chinese and Chinese people are supposed to help each other.”*

Following the guidelines suggested in the previous chapter of this article, we will first attempt to identify Myla's social categorizations/identities based on observations and interviews. Myla is a Chinese, woman, young adult. The next step is the context surrounding her life in China and in Jordan, for example: the relationship with her mother, with her employer, the sponsorship systems that enabled her employment in Jordan, the dynamics of the K-Pop community she was in, etc. From the

identified social categorizations and contexts, we can proceed with a literature review in order to understand the said categorizations and contexts. Drawing from the story of Myla, we can see that she has effectively employed her multiple and intersecting identities (e.g., Chinese and woman) to navigate through life in Jordan. She first found a job in Jordan aided by a relative in China, worked in an Asian grocery shop in Amman, effectively made friends in the K-Pop community using her popularity as an Asian *and* woman, and has her employer helping her maintain the legal status by keeping the job functional on paper. With the *Kafala* system still functioning in all constraints, Myla has successfully navigated through the system to thrive in Jordan using her multiple and intersecting identities (Tran, 2022). Similar to the case of Tanko where Ngeh and Pelican highlighted the notion that practices of alienation and discrimination against foreigners appear to promote the need for solidarity between foreign migrants, we can see that Myla and her employer protect and support each other over shared nationality and ethnicity, or how she seeks communities that share similar features to that of her own (i.e., the Korean Pop community) to avoid alienation. All that were illustrated effectively by an intersectional approach in studying and analyses.

### Conclusion

This paper so far has attempted to introduce intersectionality as a concept, traced its background, highlighted its potential in researching migrant workers, and proposed a guideline for analyses with two case studies presented. Drawing from the previous key points and components of intersectionality, and from the illustration of the two presented case studies, I would conclude that the application of intersectionality in researching migrant workers does offer a powerful lens to understand their multifaceted lived experiences and



challenges. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of various social identities such as gender, race, class, and nationality, an intersectional approach helps uncover the nuanced ways in which structural inequalities intersect to shape the lived realities of migrant workers. Because of this, intersectional research helps amplify the importance of adopting inclusive policies and practices that address the unique needs of diverse migrant populations. This entails recognizing and dismantling intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression, while also amplifying the voices and agency of marginalized migrant communities. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity of advocating for labor rights, access to social services, and pathways to citizenship that uphold the dignity and well-being of all migrant workers.

Embracing intersectionality in migrant worker research not only deepens our understanding of their experiences but also paves the way for more equitable and inclusive approaches to advocacy, policymaking, and social change. By centering intersectional perspectives, we can work towards building more just and inclusive societies where the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their migration status, are upheld and respected.

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