

# A Review of Intersectional Barriers to Participation in Social Movements

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**Abstract:** *Participation in social movements is widely recognized as a vital mechanism for democratic engagement and social transformation; however, access to such participation is unevenly distributed across social groups. This review paper examines intersectional barriers that limit participation in social movements by analyzing how overlapping identities such as gender, race, caste, class, disability, ethnicity, and migration status shape experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on intersectionality theory, the review synthesizes interdisciplinary scholarship to demonstrate that structural inequalities, economic precarity, cultural marginalization, digital divides, and state repression operate simultaneously rather than independently. The findings reveal that marginalized individuals often encounter compounded constraints, including limited access to resources, leadership exclusion, heightened surveillance, and internal movement hierarchies that reproduce dominant power relations.*

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Social Movements, Participation Barriers

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social movements have historically played a critical role in challenging power structures, advancing civil rights, and promoting social change. However, participation in these movements is not equally accessible to all individuals. Scholars increasingly argue that barriers to participation are shaped by intersectionality, a framework that examines how multiple social identities such as gender, class, race, caste, disability, sexuality, and migration status intersect to produce unique forms of disadvantage. This review paper synthesizes existing literature to examine the intersectional barriers that limit participation in social movements, highlighting structural, cultural, economic, and institutional constraints that operate simultaneously across social locations (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).

Social movements have historically served as critical instruments for advocating social justice, challenging systemic inequalities, and promoting transformative change. However, participation in these movements is not uniformly accessible to all individuals. Research increasingly highlights that barrier to engagement are shaped by intersectionality, a framework that examines how multiple social identities such as gender, race, class, caste, disability, sexuality, and migration status interact to produce unique forms of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). Traditional social movement theories often focus on structural opportunities or resource mobilization, but they frequently overlook how intersecting forms of oppression limit access to participation, leadership, and influence within movements (McAdam, 1999).

Marginalized individuals may face compounded challenges, including economic precarity, cultural exclusion, ableist or patriarchal norms, and institutional repression, which operate simultaneously and reinforce one another (Einwohner et al., 2000; Della Porta, 2013). This review aims to synthesize existing literature on intersectional barriers, highlighting how structural, cultural, and internal movement dynamics restrict participation and emphasizing the need for inclusive strategies that address these complex inequalities.

## CONCEPTUALIZING INTERSECTIONALITY IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The concept of intersectionality was first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how systems of oppression such as racism and sexism interact rather than operate independently. Within social movement studies, intersectionality

provides a lens to understand why marginalized groups often experience exclusion even within movements that claim to represent them (Crenshaw, 1991). Traditional social movement theories, such as resource mobilization and political opportunity structures, often overlook how intersecting identities shape access to resources, leadership roles, and collective voice (McAdam, 1999). Intersectional analysis thus expands movement scholarship by emphasizing lived experiences and power hierarchies within activism itself.

Intersectionality has emerged as a vital analytical framework for understanding the complex ways in which multiple axes of social identity intersect to shape individuals' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in social movements. Originally conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991), intersectionality highlights how categories such as race, gender, class, caste, sexuality, disability, and migration status are not discrete, but mutually constitutive, producing unique forms of oppression that cannot be understood in isolation. Within the context of social movements, intersectionality offers a lens to analyze why marginalized groups often face barriers even in movements that claim to advocate for equality.

Traditional social movement theories, such as resource mobilization and political opportunity structures, typically focus on collective action dynamics, organizational resources, and institutional opportunities (McAdam, 1999). While these frameworks provide insight into movement formation and participation, they often overlook how systemic inequalities and intersecting identities affect individuals' capacity to participate fully and meaningfully. Intersectional approaches, in contrast, foreground the lived experiences of those at the margins, emphasizing how multiple structural disadvantages interact to limit agency, visibility, and leadership within collective struggles (Collins, 2000).

Research demonstrates that gender and race intersect to produce distinctive forms of exclusion in social movements. Women from racialized or marginalized caste backgrounds often experience both patriarchal oppression within their own communities and structural bias within broader movements (Mohanty, 2003). Leadership roles in activist organizations are disproportionately occupied by individuals from dominant social groups, while the perspectives and priorities of women and minority participants are frequently marginalized or tokenized (Einwohner, Hollander, & Olson, 2000).

Similarly, socioeconomic status intersects with other identities to create barriers to participation. Individuals from lower-income backgrounds often face constraints such as time poverty, economic precarity, and limited access to organizational resources, which impede sustained involvement in activism (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Barker, Johnson, & Lavalette, 2001). These economic barriers are further compounded when they intersect with factors such as migration status, disability, or caregiving responsibilities, resulting in layered obstacles that are difficult to overcome without targeted support.

Intersectionality also elucidates the ways in which cultural and symbolic exclusion operate within social movements. Dominant narratives, language, and organizational norms often reflect the perspectives of privileged groups, marginalizing minority voices and discouraging meaningful participation (Fraser, 2000; Guru, 2009). Disability studies scholars highlight additional barriers, showing that physical inaccessibility, communication obstacles, and ableist assumptions limit the participation of persons with disabilities (Charlton, 1998; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012). Furthermore, the rise of digital activism has both expanded opportunities for mobilization and reproduced structural inequalities. While online platforms provide avenues for participation, unequal access to technology and digital literacy, as well as risks of online harassment, disproportionately affect marginalized groups, limiting the inclusivity of digital social movements (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Tufekci, 2017).

Conceptualizing social movement participation through an intersectional lens allows scholars and practitioners to recognize the multiplicity of barriers faced by marginalized communities. By accounting for overlapping identities and systemic inequities, intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of who participates, who is excluded, and why. This perspective underscores the importance of inclusive organizing, equitable resource distribution, and reflexive movement strategies that acknowledge and address internal power hierarchies. Only by integrating intersectional analysis can social movements become truly representative and effective in promoting social justice across diverse social locations (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).

## **GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS-BASED BARRIERS**

Gender remains a significant barrier to participation in social movements, particularly when intersecting with race and class. Women from marginalized racial or caste backgrounds often face dual exclusion both from mainstream movements dominated by privileged groups and from patriarchal norms within their own communities (Mohanty, 2003). Studies show that leadership roles in social movements are disproportionately occupied by men from dominant social groups, limiting the visibility and influence of women and gender minorities (Einwohner, Hollander, & Olson, 2000). Additionally, working-class women frequently experience time poverty due to unpaid care work, restricting their capacity for sustained activism (Federici, 2012).

Gender, race, and class intersect to produce significant barriers to participation in social movements, often rendering marginalized individuals less visible and less influential within activist spaces. Women, particularly those from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds, face structural and cultural constraints that limit their engagement in political activism. Studies have shown that social movements, even those advocating for equality, often reproduce patriarchal norms, prioritizing male leadership and male-dominated agendas (Einwohner, Hollander, & Olson, 2000).

For example, feminist movements in Western contexts have historically centered the concerns of middle-class white women, while the specific struggles of women of color, working-class women, and migrant women have been marginalized (Mohanty, 2003). Similarly, in the Global South, women from marginalized caste or tribal communities confront compounded barriers arising from both gendered and caste-based hierarchies, which restrict their access to leadership roles, decision-making, and mobilization networks (Guru, 2009).

Race and ethnicity further complicate access to social movements. Racialized minorities often experience exclusion through both overt discrimination and subtler forms of cultural marginalization within movements. Their perspectives may be ignored or tokenized, leading to symbolic representation rather than substantive influence (Fraser, 2000). For instance, African American women in the United States have historically faced challenges in participating in civil rights movements due to the dual pressures of racism and sexism, which limited their opportunities to shape agendas or occupy prominent leadership positions (Collins, 2000). Intersectional analysis reveals that race cannot be understood in isolation from gender and class; the combination of these identities creates unique vulnerabilities that hinder sustained activism and full inclusion.

Class-based barriers also play a critical role in constraining participation. Economic precarity restricts the ability of working-class individuals to devote time and resources to activism. Daily wage earners, informal workers, and women performing unpaid care work are particularly disadvantaged, as participation in protests, organizing meetings, or campaigns often entails significant financial and social risks (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Federici, 2012). The lack of economic resources intersects with gender and race, meaning that marginalized women and racial minorities from lower socio-economic backgrounds face compounded obstacles to participation. This economic exclusion affects not only the physical ability to engage but also access to knowledge, networks, and leadership opportunities within social movements, often privileging activists from more affluent and socially dominant groups.

Furthermore, the social and cultural norms associated with gender, race, and class influence both the perception and reception of activists. Women of color or lower-class women may be subject to heightened scrutiny, harassment, or stereotyping when engaging in public activism, which discourages participation and limits visibility (Mohanty, 2003). Similarly, upper-class or majority-race activists often dominate the narrative and agenda-setting, inadvertently silencing or marginalizing voices from less privileged groups. These intersecting barriers illustrate that participation in social movements is not merely a matter of individual choice or motivation but is profoundly shaped by systemic inequalities that operate across multiple axes of identity.

Gender, race, and class-based barriers reveal how intersectional oppressions systematically restrict access to social movements. Addressing these barriers requires deliberate strategies to ensure inclusive representation, equitable resource distribution, and recognition of the unique challenges faced by individuals with intersecting marginalized identities. Without such measures, social movements risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to challenge, limiting both the diversity and the effectiveness of collective action.

## **ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS**

Economic precarity is a major intersectional barrier affecting participation in social movements. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds often lack the financial resources, flexible work schedules, and social capital required for protest participation, travel, or long-term organizing (Barker, Johnson, & Lavalette, 2001). When poverty intersects with caste, race, or migrant status, these constraints intensify. For example, informal workers and daily wage laborers risk income loss or job termination if they engage in activism, making participation a costly and risky endeavor (Piven & Cloward, 1977). As a result, social movements may unintentionally privilege those with economic security.

Economic inequality represents a critical intersectional barrier that significantly limits participation in social movements. Individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face structural constraints that make engagement in activism difficult or even prohibitive. Social movement theory highlights that access to resources such as time, money, social networks, and political knowledge is a prerequisite for effective participation (McAdam, 1999). For marginalized communities, these resources are unevenly distributed due to systemic poverty, labor exploitation, and social exclusion, which intersect with other identity markers such as gender, caste, race, and disability. For instance, women from economically disadvantaged households frequently experience “time poverty” because unpaid domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities consume significant portions of their daily lives, leaving limited time for collective action (Federici, 2012). This constraint is further exacerbated when women belong to racial or caste minorities, compounding both economic and social exclusion (Mohanty, 2003).

Economic precarity also manifests in the material risks associated with activism. Participation in protests, strikes, or organizational activities often involves direct financial costs, such as transportation, childcare, or lost wages. For informal workers, daily wage earners, or migrant laborers, even brief absences from work can threaten survival, employment stability, or social standing (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Moreover, state repression and legal restrictions frequently target marginalized groups, making participation a potentially costly and risky endeavor. This intersection of economic vulnerability and political marginalization means that the voices of the poor are often underrepresented in collective action, reinforcing cycles of exclusion within social movements (Barker, Johnson, & Lavalette, 2001).

Resource constraints also affect access to social and symbolic capital. Wealthier participants are better able to leverage networks, media platforms, and organizational structures to amplify their concerns, while economically disadvantaged individuals face barriers to recognition and influence (Collins, 2000). Digital activism, increasingly central to contemporary social movements, similarly reflects inequalities in resource distribution. Limited access to smartphones, computers, or reliable internet prevents economically marginalized groups from engaging fully in online organizing or advocacy, which often supplements or replaces in-person mobilization (Earl & Kimport, 2011). These technological barriers intersect with other forms of marginalization, including geographic location and education, further constraining participation opportunities.

Economic inequality also shapes leadership and decision-making within movements. Individuals from higher-income backgrounds often dominate leadership roles, funding structures, and strategic planning, while marginalized participants have limited influence over agenda-setting and movement priorities (Freeman, 1972). This internal stratification can reinforce exclusion and reduce the perceived legitimacy of social movements among disadvantaged populations. Addressing economic barriers, therefore, requires deliberate strategies, such as providing financial support, flexible participation opportunities, childcare services, and accessible digital tools. By recognizing and mitigating the intersection of economic inequality with other social identities, movements can foster greater inclusivity, ensuring that those most affected by systemic oppression have meaningful avenues to participate and shape collective action.

## **CASTE, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURAL EXCLUSION**

In South Asian contexts, caste functions as a powerful axis of exclusion within social movements. Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalized caste groups often face symbolic and structural marginalization, even in progressive movements advocating equality (Guru, 2009). Cultural norms, language barriers, and dominant narratives frequently reflect upper-caste perspectives, discouraging meaningful participation from oppressed communities. Similar patterns are observed globally where ethnic minorities experience cultural misrecognition and tokenistic inclusion rather than genuine representation (Fraser, 2000).

## **DISABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY BARRIERS**

Persons with disabilities encounter significant intersectional barriers in social movement participation due to physical inaccessibility, communication barriers, and ableist assumptions about activism. Protests, meetings, and organizing spaces are often designed without consideration for diverse mobility, sensory, or cognitive needs (Charlton, 1998). When disability intersects with poverty or gender, exclusion becomes more pronounced. Feminist disability scholars argue that movements frequently prioritize visibility and physical presence, marginalizing those who cannot conform to these norms (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012).

## **DIGITAL DIVIDE AND TECHNOLOGICAL EXCLUSION**

While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for activism, they have also created new intersectional barriers. Access to digital tools is unevenly distributed across class, gender, rural-urban divides, and global North–South contexts (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Women, older adults, and marginalized communities often face digital illiteracy, surveillance risks, and online harassment, which discourage participation (Tufekci, 2017). Thus, digital activism may reproduce existing inequalities rather than democratize participation.

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL REPRESSION**

State surveillance, policing, and legal restrictions disproportionately affect marginalized communities involved in social movements. Intersectional identities shape exposure to repression, with racialized, indigenous, migrant, and minority activists facing higher risks of violence, arrest, and criminalization (Della Porta, 2013). Fear of state retaliation, especially among undocumented migrants or politically vulnerable groups, acts as a powerful deterrent to participation. These dynamics illustrate how structural power intersects with identity to limit civic engagement.

## **INTERNAL MOVEMENT DYNAMICS AND EXCLUSION**

Barriers to participation are not only external but also embedded within social movements themselves. Hierarchical leadership structures, ideological rigidity, and lack of inclusive decision-making processes often silence marginalized voices (Freeman, 1972). Intersectional scholars emphasize that movements must confront internal power inequalities to avoid reproducing the very forms of domination they seek to dismantle (Collins, 2000). Failure to address these internal dynamics leads to burnout, disengagement, and fragmentation.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

This review highlights that participation in social movements is shaped by complex and intersecting barriers rooted in gender, class, race, caste, disability, technology, and state power. Intersectionality offers a critical framework for understanding why certain voices remain marginalized within collective action spaces. Addressing these barriers requires not only policy reforms and structural change but also reflexive practices within movements themselves. Inclusive organizing, resource redistribution, and recognition of diverse lived experiences are essential for building truly democratic and transformative social movements.

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