

Module 10: Background Reading on The Power of Privilege

Whiteness theory, critical race theory and social privilege theory A- Personal Reflections from the perspectives of the *White, Middle Class* lead researchers of this project, Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei

While over the years, we had considered Whiteness Theory and other theories addressing the power of privilege, it was not until our work with the Global Compact on Refugees that we really understand and applied these to our work, as we struggled to address the barriers to the full participation of refugee women and girls. Lack of access to the decision-making process affected not only their lives, but also of their families and their communities. As we worked with elite policy actors and stakeholders from around the world, we also came to understand that the privileges inherent in your class position in society, and your gender followed closely behind white privilege as major barriers.

This thinking has guided our work in the current research cycle. It has not been a comfortable process, We were forced us to look at the privileges we have brought into the work, and how we have used (or mis-used) them over the years. It is nice to be given the power to speak 'on behalf' of others at prestigious international meetings, and a seat at the policy table. Power is a great ego booster, and to consciously relinquish power can be difficult. This we have struggled to do, and often failed. However, the reward for challenging ourselves in this way is a different understanding and experience of power, the power that comes with building trust with individuals and communities and working collaboratively to achieve change. This is also the power that refugee women experience when they flourish and achieve great things on their own behalf, and when they are empowered to stand up to the forces that oppress them.

Being conscious of white privilege and other social privileges, and expressing this honestly with colleagues, can at times also be used as an advantage. In situations where women activists from the global south have felt it would be unsafe for them to take certain actions or make certain statements in public meetings, they have asked us to do it, knowing that our privilege would protect us. Until we genuinely achieve gender equality, and the world is no longer racist, which at times seem to be an impossible dream, this is a reality. If done in full knowledge of what is happening, this subversion of privilege is, at times, one of the more effective tools we have. If done badly it just reinforces the power of the privileged.

One of the first clear articulations of white privilege is based on the now famous 1988 essay by Peggy McIntosh, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account Of Coming To See Correspondences Through Work In Women's Studies*, which is still relevant today and has been the basis of subsequent work, which both build on and critically analyse its usefulness. McIntosh describes white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which white people do not acknowledge and which results in them being materially comfortable, confident, and oblivious to racial issues, while non white people tend to be less materially comfortable, confident, and alienated. She wrote that most white people are reluctant to acknowledge their privilege and instead look for ways to justify or minimise the effects of it, believing that their privilege is fully earned. Even those who understand that privilege is systemic may nonetheless deny having personally benefited from it and may oppose efforts to dismantle it. They resist acknowledging their privilege because to do so would mean accepting that the success they achieved was not solely from their own efforts.

White privilege is a concept within critical whiteness theory which contends that 'whiteness' is a socially constructed norm, whereby the ideologies, social norms and behaviours associated with white culture are normalised and upheld at the top of the racial hierarchy. This leads to cultural dichotomies between 'white' and 'other', based on expectations of stereotypical behaviour. This

construction of whiteness as the norm is reinforced by legal and political processes which privilege the 'white' race. It causes socioeconomic disadvantage among racial minorities. This leads to an underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minority individuals and is therefore one of the key social structures that enforces white dominance. This is not easily recognised by the white majority, causing Coleman, Charles and Bonam (2020, p.2) to reflect that characteristic of whiteness is that it is often taken for granted or ignored. Even astute readers of racial justice may have given little thought to what whiteness is and where it comes from.

Closely related is the field of **Critical Race Theory**, which addresses the same issues of systemic racism from a different angle. It studies race and ethnicity rather than whiteness, and tends to be researched by and focused on people of colour, whereas whiteness theory is primarily researched by and focused on white people (Burton, 2009, cited in Chen, 2017).

The concept of **Social Privilege** expands the concept of white privilege to include other forms of privilege, including class, race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship, religion, physical ability, health and age, among others. Along with *race and gender*, *class privilege* is the most influential. While all of these privileges are intersectional, **Gender Privilege** cross cuts all other groups. **Class** strongly influences one's overall quality of life, including health, mental health, education, profession, affluence, social status and access to power.

For us, **white, gender and social privilege theory** provided some answers to the important questions of why it was so difficult to persuade power brokers and key stakeholders to change their positions to addressing the barriers to the participation of refugees, in particular refugee women, as critical participants in the decision making about solutions which determine their lives. They are clearly visible in the humanitarian and development arenas, which are dominated by white people and non-white people from the educated ruling class. This is a critical barrier to the participation of refugees, who are seldom white or upper class.

Additional Introductory readings.

McIntosh, Peggy (1989) "*White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*" and a publication of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Philadelphia, PA. and "*Some Notes for Facilitators*" (2010) <https://www.nationalseedproject.org/key-seed-texts/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack>

Restorative Resolutions, 2016, Excerpt from "*Understanding Race and Privilege*", National Association of School Psychologists: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/social-justice/understanding-race-and-privilege>

Hubbar, K, Revo-Cohen, L, Crider, C, Chris Kilmartin and Maria Morukian (2018) Toxic Culture: Unearned Privilege, Living Around, <https://www.womanaroundtown.com/sections/living-around/toxic-culture-uneared-privilege/>