

**Intersectional analysis as a framework  
of action for (White) feminist activist  
praxis: The case of #NousToutes,  
the French movement  
against gender-based violence**

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**Abstract**

This paper addresses the articulation of intersectionality, a concept which emerged from Black liberation movements to unveil the specific nature of Black women's oppression, by contemporaneous (White) feminist activist movements against gender-based violence. Combining desk-based and empirical research, this paper uses #NousToutes, the main movement against gender-based violence in France, to conceptualise intersectional analysis as an ideological, political and organisational framework for feminist activist praxis. The first section explains why Black women must remain the only epistemological subjects, users and theorists of the concept of intersectionality and how this argument has been articulated by French activist movements tackling interlocking forms of discrimination. Contextualising *intersectionality wars* in the activist space, the second section critically

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addresses the issue of whitened and performative intersectional activism as a way to practise a more *ethical feminism*. The third section starts by discussing the rationale behind the necessity to visibilise and tackle interlocking forms of power amidst the “intersectionality versus universalism” debate in France. The author then examines the different strategies employed by #NousToutes to mitigate the phenomenon of appropriation of intersectionality by White feminist movements while progressively centring the necessity to tackle interlocking forms of discrimination in its political and ideological position.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, black feminism, feminist activism, gender-based violence.

## 1. Introduction

*Intersectional analysis may take us down many roads, but we will only discover what it is by using it (Crenshaw 2011, 233).*

As implied by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is an analysis-in-progress, an ever-evolving, transformative concept, dependent on historical, geographical, social and political contexts. It is constantly being extrapolated, re-imagined, re-adapted to the extent that it is sometimes emptied of its political and liberatory substantial roots. Emerging from Black liberation activist movements, the concept has been travelling back and forth between the activist and the academic spaces. This paper seeks to critically analyse the organisationally and ideologically driven process of mobilising intersectional analysis as a framework of action for feminist activist praxis by #NousToutes, one of the largest anti-Gender-Based Violence (GBV) movements in France.

The argument developed here is that the concept of intersectionality shall not be stripped of its Black liberation roots, thus understanding intersectionality as the

creation of a new form of discrimination at the crossroad of the race, gender and class axes. Hence, this paper rejects Sharon Doetsch-Kidder's (2016, 21) notion of "intersectional activism", that would simply be defined as "activism that addresses more than one structure of oppression or form of discrimination (racism, classism, sexism, hetero-sexism, transphobia, ableism, nationalism etc.)". Such a conceptualisation, it is argued, is symptomatic of the co-optation and appropriation of the intersectionality discourse by White feminists (Bilge 2015). Rather, although intersectional analysis can inform (predominantly) White movements' activism, the concept of intersectionality itself should only be used by and for Black Women (Alexander-Floyd 2012, 19). Rather, although intersectional analysis can inform (predominantly) White movements' activism, the concept of intersectionality itself should only be used by and for Black Women (*Ibidem*). In other words, this does not mean that White feminists cannot articulate intersectional analysis but rather that it should not be labelled as such when it is dissociated from the racial question. This echoes Jules Falquet's argument to use alternative terminologies such as *interlocking systems of power* to resist the appropriation by White feminists of the concept of intersectionality - amongst other reasons (Falquet *et al.* 2016). This paper offers a discussion about the attempted operationalisation of such an intersectional analysis as a framework of action for (White) feminist activist praxis to ensure that (White) feminists "stop doing intersectionality in ways that undo it" (Bilge 2013, 411).

The concept of intersectionality as a framework of action for feminist activist praxis derives from David Snow et al.'s (2018, 395, emphasis added) definition of collective action frames as "*relatively coherent* sets of action-oriented *beliefs* and *meanings* that *legitimise* and *inspire* social movement campaigns and activities". This definition is helpful given that it enables an understanding of intersectionality, not simply as an activist praxis but rather as ideology that gives meaning to activist actions while recognising its *legitimising* and *relatively coherent* nature.

These two adjectives mitigate the disregard towards a tokenistic and straightforward application of intersectionality to activist praxis. Furthermore, by talking about a “framework for action for (White) feminist activist praxis”, this paper recognises that such a framework can be implemented by social movements, in a relatively coherent manner, both politically and organisationally rather than conceptualising it as a solely theoretical and discursive notion.

The first section explains why Black women must remain the only epistemological subjects, users and theorists of the concept of intersectionality and how this argument has been articulated by French activist movements tackling interlocking forms of discrimination (1). Contextualising “intersectionality wars” in the activist space, the second section critically addresses the issue of whitened and performative intersectionality in the (French) activist space as a way to practise a more “ethical feminism” (2). The third section starts by discussing the rationale behind the necessity to visibilise and tackle interlocking forms of power amidst the *intersectionality versus universalism* debate in France. The author then examines the different strategies employed by #NousToutes to mitigate the phenomenon of appropriation of intersectionality by White feminist movements while progressively centring the necessity to tackle interlocking forms of discrimination in its political and ideological position (3).

## 2. Methodology

As an attempt to contribute to filling the gap identified by Sirma Bilge (2013, 411) arguing that “there is a certain propensity in continental European feminist scholarship on intersectionality to discuss intersectionality without much empirical grounding”, this paper primarily bases its argument on empirical research and qualitative data analysis. The author begins by acknowledging her peculiar position as both researcher and member of #NousToutes since October 2020 and of its new

national steering committee since September 2021. Such a status enables the researcher to “become the research instrument” (Symon & Cassell 2012, 198) located at the heart of the experiences and events of the collective. The methodology adopted here is participant observation with a researcher’s role, according to Raymond Gold (1958, 219-220)’s typology of the participants observer roles, as a “complete participant”. Indeed, for over one year, the author, along with the twenty other members of the national steering committee, has been significantly involved in the collective on a daily basis, attending and facilitating meetings, deciding about its political and strategic orientations, planning mobilisations, co-supervising working groups, recruiting volunteers, responding to media requests, amongst other roles. Also known as “complete membership” (Adler and Adler 1987), such a method of participant observation implies that the observer becomes a full member of the social setting that they wish to document, with the organisational mission overcoming the observational objective (Symon and Cassell 2012, 298). Given the ethical challenges posed by the adoption of a covert position whereby the researcher chooses not to disclose their true intention, a position that could appear dishonest and extractive to participants, the author has decided to base her research technique on overt observation. However, the dynamic and iterative nature of overt and complete membership participant observation suggests that the participants cannot always be made aware of the research objectives (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 70). To mitigate this limitation, the author has consulted the participants after the qualitative data analysis and drafting phases. Being a “complete member” of this anti-GBV movement, the author had access to a diversity of sources including meeting notes, internal documents and guidelines while having the possibility to conduct semi-structured interviews with six members of the national steering committee as part of a final research phase. All these interviews were conducted in French and have been translated by the author. Additionally, empirical observational research is combined with desk-based research

which enabled the establishment of a framework for the conceptualisation of intersectionality adopted in this paper.

### **3. Black women as the sole epistemological subjects, users and theorists of intersectionality**

#### ***3.1. From Truth to Crenshaw: The race-gender-class triad***

This paper endeavours to avoid the pitfall of telling *the* origin story of intersectionality which would have emerged out of a singular voice, a single text or a single historical event. Rather, the development of this concept is understood as an ongoing process rooted in “intellectual genealogies” (Nash 2019a, 39). The first section seeks to centre Black social movements in the herstory of intersectionality, revolving around the race-gender-class triad. Indeed, many commentators refer to the American anti-slavery and the civil right movements as the contexts of visibilisation of the uniqueness of the Black women’s experiences by female activists (Carastathis 2016; Carbado *et al.* 2013; Collins 2016; K. Crenshaw 1989; Nash 2019a). Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Beals, Barbarah Smith, Maria W. Stewart, Ida B. Well and Sadie Tanner Mosell Alexander Wells, amongst others, are social justice activists who deeply contributed to the development of intersectionality.

In her groundbreaking and improvised speech at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, pronounced on May 29, 1851, Sojourner Truth (1851 [1995], 36) begs the question: “Ain’t I a woman?”. Former slave, religious speaker and anti-slavery activist, Sojourner Truth is often described as one of the first women’s rights activists who unveiled the harmful separation of the feminist and the anti-racist agendas (Carastathis 2016, 16). Truth’s powerful rhetoric deeply contrasted with first wave White feminists’ advocacy against external forms of oppression and lack of participation of women in the political sphere through the extension of White women’s privileges and in favour of the restrictions on the right to vote based on race and

property ownership (Yang 2020). Since the Nineteenth century, Black feminist activists questioned the universalising paradigm reducing women's oppression to White and upper-class women's experiences. Therefore, the first step towards the conceptualisation of intersectionality was the visibilisation of the unique realities of Black women, at the crossroad of race, class and gender.

A few decades later, Anna Julia Cooper (1892 [1998], 112-115, emphasis added), sociologist and Black liberation activist, further denounced the erasure of Black women from History and liberation struggles explaining that the Black Woman “occupies, one may say, a *unique* position in this country”, as she is confronted to both a “woman question and a race problem”. The development of the political and discursive concept of intersectionality in social-movement discourse and praxis continues in the seventies with the publication of Frances Beal (1979 [2008])'s essay titled *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female*. Although Beal's discussion on intersecting oppression is often overlooked when discussing the origin of intersectionality, her work has been pivotal in the development of a systemic analysis of Black women's domination (Collins 2016, 68). Indeed, Beal's systemic approach analyses for the first time the impact of patriarchy within the Black Power movement in parallel to the prevalence of racism in the women's liberation movement. Notably, the author names and articulates colonialism and capitalism as additional interlocking systems of power at play in the double jeopardy of being Black and female (Beal 2008, 168, 173). She discusses the overwhelming engagement of Black women in domestic and agricultural labour to illustrate this double jeopardy, structurally rooted in race, class and gender.

Although intersectionality is yet to be coined, the notion is increasingly present in Black feminist thought, systematically anchored in activist praxis. The Combahee River Collective Statement appears within most narratives of intersectionality's *Herstory* as a foundational text (Collins 2016, 67). The Boston-based Black

feminist lesbian organisation promoted “an antiracist, feminist practice with a radical, anti-capitalist analysis”, explicitly basing their political movement and mode of organising into Black Feminism (Smith 2003, xvi). The Combahee River Collective statement is the first of its kind to speak about the concept of “*interlocking systems of oppression*” (Combahee River Collective 1977, emphasis added) Barbara Smith (2003, xxxiv) later explained the purpose of this statement which was to expose this “simultaneity of oppression” without having to “rank oppression”, as this was often the case in social movements.

The concept of intersectionality as it is articulated contemporarily in social sciences was coined and took shape in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s landmark essays *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (Crenshaw 1989) and *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (Crenshaw 1991). Crenshaw’s theorisation emerges from the observation that the politicisation of women’s experiences in the feminist movements and of Black people in the antiracist movements occurred as if these experiences were operating on “mutually exclusive terrains” (*Ibidem*). Thus, her theorisation is clearly underpinned by Black liberation movements and activist praxis. After illustrating her legal concept of intersectionality, Crenshaw endeavours to broaden the perspective by contextualising the erasure of Black women’s claim within a structural White racial setting. Not only are Black women not accounted for, but “their exclusion is reinforced when *White* women speak for and as *women*” (Crenshaw 1989, 154). She then refers to Sojourner Truth’s contribution to the visibilisation of Black women’s experiences within the feminist movement, ending her analysis with a discussion on contemporary feminist praxis and theory remaining White and incapable of addressing non-privileged women’s experiences. This analytical process is particularly interesting as it demonstrates Crenshaw’s commitment to anchor her analysis within Black feminist praxis while urging White



feminists to deconstruct their universalising and ultimately racist feminist praxis and politics.

This section briefly outlined how black liberation movements established the roots for the development of the concept of intersectionality as describing a unique form of discrimination located at the intersection of the race, gender and class axes. Therefore, historically, Black women have been the epistemological subjects, users and theorists of intersectionality.

***3.2. “Intersectionality as indissociable from the racial question”:  
Lessons from other French activist movements tackling interlocking forms  
of oppression***

A conceptualisation of intersectionality restricted to the gender-race-class triad appears to be an essential political choice associated with the necessity to acknowledge its Black activist liberatory roots and to (re)politicise the articulation of the notion. In other words, it is argued here that the term “intersectionality” should only be mobilised within the antiracist and feminist social activist setting. Interestingly, this position is equally observable in several French activist movements tackling more than one system of power.

Mwasi is an AfroFeminist collective created in 2014 that engages in an intersectional criticism of the capitalistic, heteropatriarchal and racist power systems and is exclusively constituted of racialised women. In their book titled *AfroFem*, the members of Mwasi (2018, emphasis added) explain: “for us, intersectionality is *indissociable from the racial question*. Not only is it about understanding how racism and patriarchy interact with one another, but also how these systems interact with class, heterosexism etc.”. Lallab, another feminist and anti-racist organisation, seeks to defend the rights and voices of Muslim women whose oppression lies at the heart of sexism, racism and islamophobia. The organisation also promotes

intersectionality as a systemic approach to account for “the multiplicity of discrimination experienced by *Black women* due to constructions of identities based on *race, gender, class* amongst others” (Lallab 2020, emphasis added).

Other organisations tackling interlocking systems of power not exclusive of racism including LGBTQIA+phobia and ableism also mobilise intersectionality in their manifestos while acknowledging the centrality of Black women’s experiences. As an example, Acceptess-T is an organisation that describes itself as being born out of

the willingness to create a group of trans activists in Paris that would focus on defending the most precarious transgender people’s rights through intersectionality [...]. The main objective of this activity is to fight against all stereotypes, all forms of discrimination such as sexism, *racism* and transphobia (Acceptess-T 2010, emphasis added).

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Indeed, for some organisations that do not primarily focus on anti-racism, such alignment with intersectional analysis needs to be carefully operated. Les Dévalideuses, an organisation “located at the intersection of ableism and sexism’ to tackle the invisibilisation of disabled women in the French feminist movement” (Les Dévalideuses 2022), explain in their manifesto that the organisation uses this word

with caution considering how the concept is often diverted. (...) Nevertheless, [They] feel deeply tied and close to struggle against racism, transphobia, homophobia, *putophobie* [discrimination against sex workers] and, more generally, to all discrimination connected to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, social class in an intersectional spirit as it has been *developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw about Black women* (*Ibidem*, emphasis added).

## 4. Contextualising “intersectionality wars” in the activist space

### *4.1. Whitened intersectionality, “ethical feminism” and appropriations by White feminist movements*

Doing intersectionality *with caution* appears to be essential to mitigate the phenomenon of whitened intersectionality. Indeed, Jennifer Nash (2019b) speaks about the “intersectionality wars” that seek to highlight and police the appropriation of intersectionality by White, mainly European scholars. Intersectionality wars do not remain in the academic sphere, as the same co-optation of the concept is observable in (mainly White) activist spaces. As Kathy Davis (2020, 114) argues, “the concept has moved beyond the academy, becoming a buzzword in organisations wishing to ‘diversify’, in NGOs, and in social movements where activists label themselves ‘intersectional’”. It is argued that the performative use of intersectionality, which has permeated the activist milieu, empties intersectionality’s political meaning through a tokenistic and opportunistic approach to legitimise discourses and actions performed by mostly White feminist movements. Intersectionality becomes merely “ornamental” (Bilge 2011) and, as Jennifer Nash (2019b, 26) posits “[it] is imagined as the flip side of “White feminism,” the kind of ethical, inclusive, and complex feminism required for feminists to revive – and to complete – their political project.”

American scholars have critically analysed the post-Donald Trump’s inauguration Women’s March in 2017 to illustrate this phenomenon of tokenistic “intersectional activism”. First, the lack of inclusion of non-White and lower-class women was denounced by many African American women (Brewer and Dundes 2018). Second, the revindications were often considered to be trivial issues such as the right to show one’s nipples in public rather than tackling structural issues like police violence against Black people (*Ibidem*). Third, its very name, the “Million Woman March” chose initially by the two White organisers appropriated the name of a 1997 March organised by African-American feminists in Philadelphia (Heaney 2021).

Therefore, despite the large mobilisation of multiple social groups of protestors and the strong coalition-building that took place before, during and after the March, this event remains a contested site of intersectional activist praxis. Other American movements such as the SlutWalk movement demonstrate a deeper lack of account for racially minoritised groups' experiences and expertise. Organisers received criticism for the utilisation of the term slut that has a racist, stigmatising and stereotyping connotation for Black women in the United States' context (Black Women's Blueprint 2011). The call for relabelling the movement has not been heard.

In the French context, Fania Noël, Afro-feminist author and former member of Mwasi, deplores a tendency, since 2015, of many feminist movements to adopt the intersectional discourse to claim that they are *not racist* (Noël 2022) - as opposed to *anti-racist*. In most cases, such organisations are led by White women and intersectionality describes interlocking systems of power that do not account for race but rather gender, class and sexual orientation (*ibidem*). Members of Mwasi further argue that

the fact that women and groups mostly composed of White people appropriate intersectionality is another demonstration of one of the negrophobic mechanisms: to take every tool that we create, precisely because this world does not let us have anything (Mwasi Collectif afroféministe, 2018).

It is in this context and against this backdrop that #NousToutes, a collective herstorically characterised by its White and upper-class membership, is attempting to centre the fight against interlocking systems of domination while avoiding another appropriation of the concept of intersectionality. However, such a political position has not always been central in the collective's politics.

#### **4.2. #MeToo and the emergence of #NousToutes as a predominantly White and mainstream movement**

#MeToo, initially coined by Afro-American feminist activist Tarana Burke in 2007 and re-introduced ten years later by actress Alyssa Milano launched a global movement for the visibilisation of sexual harassment and sexual violence, encouraging survivors to share their stories of violence. The French version of the #MeToo campaign, #BalanceTonPorc (translated literally “#SquealOnYourPig”) erupted in October 2017, on an initiative by Sandra Miller (a journalist based in New York). Some commentators analysed the impact of the different terminologies used for the American and the French hashtags and noticed that the latter triggered the publication of more “aggressive”, “vulgar” and “accusing” tweets (Lopez *et al.* 2020, 738-739). The hashtag “MeToo” suggests a movement of solidarity, creating a network of survivors whereas the hashtag “BalanceTonPorc” seeks to denounce perpetrators and to provide a - in some cases explicit - description of the circumstances of the assault. Such a difference in online mobilising against sexual harassment provoked different types of backlash in France, including a strong resistance within the French *soixante-huitard* movement with the much controversial open letter published in *Le Monde* signed by over 200 women, promoting men’s freedom to pester as being essential to sexual freedom (Le Monde 2018). The open letter compared this new “puritanism” to “the good old days of witchcraft”, deploring a so-called “anti-men feminism” (*Ibidem*).

This is the challenging context of creation of the collective #NousToutes (“All of us”) which emerged from the observation that the #BalanceTonPorc movement did not seem to be reaching the momentum that would create tangible change towards the elimination of GBV within French society. Feminist organisations, collectives and associations as well as political parties and unions gathered in July 2018 to create a national collective against GBV with the view to organise the first French large-scale demonstration as part of the 16 days of activism against GBV (#NousToutes 2022). The objective of the collective was to unite and account for

the different aspects of the French feminist movement around the fight against GBV through the visibilisation of this topic within the public, political and mediatic space. In 2018, 30 000 demonstrators protested in Paris, constituting an unprecedented and heretorical effort of feminist mobilisation in France (Prissette 2018). After the protest, the feminist collective decided to continue its work on prevention against GBV and quickly gained visibility on social media. At the time of writing, #NousToutes' Instagram account has reached nearly half a million followers.

#### ***4.3. The “universalism versus intersectionality” debate in the French activist and political context***

Allegedly, due to the founders' willingness to unify and merge a broad diversity of feminisms around a topic that brings about consensus, #NousToutes has been described as a “mainstream” feminist movement (Haegel, 2018), with a majority of universalist feminists aligning with the collective since its creation (Bestandji, 2020; Mourgere, 2018; Rossignol, 2018). Notably, at the time, one of the co-founders and former main media figures of the movement, Caroline De Haas, was also strongly associated with universalist feminist views (Pavard *et al.* 2020, 226). Yuna Miralles, member of the national steering committee, remembers:

In 2018, there was an emergency to tackle the lack of action taken by public authorities against GBV. The will to organise a protest is born from this emergency and the collective was a tool to lead this action. This tool has evolved since, but yes, originally, #NousToutes was created by White women, from a certain socio-economic class who fought against oppression that concerned them (Yuna Miralles, 11 October 2022).

In reaction to the lack of inclusion of other types of feminisms, social struggles and lack of centring of key questions such as economic and racist violence within the #NousToutes movement, during the November 24th March, another group of

dissenting organisations joined the protest under the #NousAussi (“Us too”). #NousAussi called for better inclusivity of intersectional feminist movements accounting for Black feminists, Muslim feminists, sex workers’ unions, disabled women’s and LGBTQIA+ organisations (Pavard *et al.* 2020, 226) including organisations previously cited such as Lallab and Acceptess-T. Through an open letter published a week before the demonstration, the #NousAussi organisation expressed concerns about the lack of centring of the specific types of violence based on racism, classism, ableism and poverty that are part of many women’s daily life. The erasure of these issues by and from contemporaneous feminist movements, alerted #NousAussi, “perpetuates a sense of isolation and, ultimately further violence and domination” (#NousAussi 2018).

#NousToutes’ position should also be analysed in light of a political context of “moral panic” observable in France when it comes to promoting intersectional analysis, be it in the public discourse or within the feminist activist milieu (Le Dem 2017, 66). As reported by Sophie Barre, member of the national steering committee:

In France, there is this duality rooted in the feminist movement between so-called *universalist feminists* and *intersectional feminists*. It’s very dividing, contrary to other countries where intersectionality appears to be evident as an approach (Sophie Barre, 5 October 2022).

In addition, the concept is largely misunderstood and criticised as threatening the universalist French heritage and hierarchising social struggles (Bloch London *et al.* 2021). The *lutte des classes* is often referred to as a way to justify that French feminists have been practising “intersectionality” long before its theorisation, looking at the “intersection” between gender and class (*Ibidem*; Kergoat 2005), showing an active resistance to acknowledge the centrality of race in the concept. Altogether, decentering Black women in Europe, argues Sirma Bilge (2013, 413), is

symptomatic of the sobering “chronic avoidance of race in European feminist debates on intersectionality” or, as French scholar Eric Fassin (2015, 13) posits, “the reluctance to openly speak about race in the French discourse”. #NousToutes was no exception and it is not until recently that the collective decided to modify its political and strategic orientation, with the view to break away from its universalist lens and reputation.

## **5. Towards a framework for action for feminist activist praxis by the #NousToutes’s movement against gender-based violence in France**

### ***5.1. The necessity to centre the dismantlement of interlocking systems of oppression into #NousToutes activism against gender-based violence: a work in progress***

The organisational structure and legal status of the collective imply that all members of #NousToutes are all volunteer activists. As a result, the turnover of the members of the national steering committee is fairly important and can potentially transform the strategic orientations of the collective. In September 2021, the author of this paper joined the newly formed national steering committee co-constituted by one of the founders, Caroline De Haas and other #NousToutes feminist activists. This new 20-member organ has been rethinking the internal structure of the collective towards a more horizontal mode of organising. One of the key objectives of the national steering committee is to reflect on a framework for collective action with the objective to better tackle all interlocking systems of domination when fighting against GBV.

It is important to state that some members of the former national steering committee were already pushing for the promotion of an agenda aiming at combating intersectional forms of violence. In November 2020, Sophie Barre organised a webinar on intersectionality with Professor Jules Falquet, sociologist and specialist on



intersectionality and interlocking social power systems. Reflecting back on one of the first attempts to bring intersectionality in #NousToutes' discourse, she says:

Several Black activists, attended the workshop and sent angry comments in capital letters saying 'Are you kidding? You are organising a workshop on intersectionality and it is facilitated by a White woman!' (...) And it's true, the term intersectionality has been coined by a Black woman and it is rightly associated with racism (Sophie Barre, 5 October 2022).

In a tweet, #NousToutes publicly recognised its mistake to "speak about racism and intersectionality without giving a voice to Black women (...) invisibilising the way this concept was invented and spread by Black women" (#NousToutes 2020). A month after this webinar, #NousToutes invited Fania Noël, Franco-Haitian, Pan-Africanist, Afro-feminist activist and author to facilitate a 2-hour webinar on intersectionality.

Progressively, the necessity to account for all power systems appeared to be essential to the fight against GBV and central to #NousToutes' new Steering Committee politics. Yuna Miralles explains "If we don't understand and speak about how power systems interlock to create specific types of violence, we will never eradicate GBV. One power system cannot remain sustainable in and of itself, it exists because it is sustained by other power systems" (Yuna Miralles, 11 October 2022). This political position has been stated in the collective's 2022 objectives which include to "broaden the scope of the fight against GBV: Racialised, disabled, LGBTQIA+, fat, poor people, etc., as well as children experience specific types of violence" and "to visibilise how other discrimination criteria interlock with gender to produce unique types of violence" (Objectives 2022, Internal document, December 2021). This demonstrates that there is no longer any ambiguity about #NousToutes' willingness to reflect and strategise around the necessity to rethink the analysis of and fight against interlocking power systems. As reported by Lena

Ben Ahmed, “We often talk about the *convergence des luttes* (the convergence of struggles) which had divided the feminist movement. It’s important to emphasise that our position is very clear: our struggles are common, we can’t fight for one without the others” (Lena Ben Ahmed, 11 October 2022).

Altogether, intersectional analysis becomes an organisational and ideological paradigm that “infuses how we think our activism” (Nathalie Meyer, 5 October 2022). Marie Fuentes confirms: “The aim is not to do some sort of ‘intersectionality-washing’ but rather to ensure that intersectional analysis is inherently constitutive of our collective” (Marie Fuentes, 8 October 2022). Even more so, Sophie Barre speaks about a

responsibility to fight against GBV accounting for interlocking power systems. We became a hegemonic collective, our work is followed by a lot of people. (...) It’s also related to the name we chose: “#NousToutes”. It can’t be « all of us » if the collective only represents white, upper class, able-bodied women, etc. (Sophie Barre, 5 October 2022).

It is important to note that members of the national steering committee usually prefer to speak about *interlocking power systems* rather than *intersecting power systems* as well as *intersectional analysis* rather than *intersectionality*. This semantic demonstrates an understanding of the restriction of the term “intersectionality” to the gender-race-class triad and a refusal to articulate it as White women. Furthermore, during a recent meeting, volunteers discussed the necessity of renaming the #NousToutes working group previously called “intersectionality division” as “political reflection and interlocking oppression division”, with the objective of “centering the fight against all interlocking oppression creating violence in the collective politics” (Meeting minutes, 8 October 2022). Furthermore, as argued by Amélie Terrien, “We don’t use the term intersectionality because we are not ‘intersectional activists’, we do not have the legitimacy to use it. Instead, we’d

rather demonstrate, on a daily basis, that it is our will to use this approach in our activism and struggle” (Amélie Terrien, 4 October 2022). As such, the collective has been developing both internal/organisational and external strategies to operationalise the dismantlement of interlocking power systems as a framework for feminist collective action in #NousToutes.

## ***5.2. The development of organisation/internal strategies towards the dismantlement of interlocking power systems as a framework for feminist collective action in #NousToutes***

### ***5.2.1. Feminist activism, positionality and self-reflexivity***

Positionality and self-reflexivity are methodological instruments aiming at identifying the power dynamics operating within any social setting. Tackling forms of GBV located at the crossroads of various axes of oppression implies an attempt to understand how these power systems also persist at the organisational level. Yuna Miralles explains:

For many #NousToutes neo-activists (...), the collective becomes a space to be self-reflexive and to reflect on the complexity of the struggles through the interactions within the collective and then within society at large. It is also a space for neo-activists to initiate a questioning about their own positionality as a white, cis, so-called *able-bodied*, heterosexual person. This will trigger a ‘radicalisation of their political positioning and higher exigences as part of their activism (Yuna Miralles, 11 October 2022).

Practical strategies are increasingly implemented to foster self-reflexivity and positionality such as stating one’s position within the social space at the start of some meetings, especially those facilitated within #NousToutes’ political reflection and interlocking oppression division (Meeting minutes, 3 October 2021). One of the mandates of this division is to develop tools in relation to the dismantlement

of interlocking power systems within the collective. An example of this is the ongoing design of an “oppression mechanisms’ identification chart” aiming at “raising awareness about our belonging to certain social groups and offering an avenue for reflection on how to deconstruct these mechanisms of oppression” (Identification chart, Internal document, December 2021). The national steering committee would also like to organise a meeting dedicated to discussing the necessity to mitigate the perpetuation of power mechanisms internally in the coming months (Meeting minutes, 5 October 2022). This is crucial, as explained by Yuna Miralles to “continue working against interlocking oppression while ensuring that we are not reproducing them within #NousToutes” (Yuna Miralles, 11 October 2022).

#### *5.2.2. Validation and internal consultation processes*

#NousToutes’ political reflection and interlocking oppression division is an essential body which is regularly consulted to review documents that will then be published or printed. When this organ was created in September 2021, #NousToutes particularly encouraged activists whose experiences are located at the crossroads of several power systems to engage. As such, when the collective designs its flyers for the yearly protest, the division is always consulted to contribute and analyse the work with a lens that is attentive to interlocking power systems. Feedback can be related to the necessity to include statistics that relate to GBV and racism, transphobia or classism, to ensure heterogeneity in relation to visual representations of women and semantics (Feedback on the WhatsApp group, 8-12 October 2022). Consultation processes also intervene when it comes to deciding what political statements will be chanted during the protests as well as when the social media team works on a topic that requires specific and situated expertise. Marie Fuentes supervises a working group of volunteers drafting factsheets on specific topics such as rape culture, GBV in the French context, the right to abortion, etc. to constitute an internal data bank. She states: “When we draft these factsheets,

intersectional analysis is a permanent prism. In addition, we decided that these factsheets should also be reviewed and validated by the previously called ‘Intersectionality division’.” (Marie Fuentes, 8 October 2022)

Altogether, Nathalie Meyer reports about the importance of this organ in order to constantly improve the understanding of the issues that the collective is trying to tackle through this validation and consultation process: “We need to always be attentive, to perpetually be researching, to listen to the feedback, to be up to date about the evolution on these topics. It’s important not to rest on our oars and to always consult concerned activists” (Nathalie Meyer, 5 October 2022).

### 5.2.3. *Towards inclusive politics of representation and decision-making*

Politics of inclusion constitute an important component of the dismantlement of interlocking power systems as a framework of action for #NousToutes’ activist praxis. Although, #NousToutes has herstorically been composed by a mainly White and middle/upper-class membership, the new national steering committee is now characterised by a greater heterogeneity of identities and backgrounds with volunteers who are racialised and/or who belong to a lower social class, and/or who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The national steering committee, which is composed of activists who have been particularly active in the collective during the year or more before its constitution, is continuously and actively endeavouring to integrate members who can better account for the multiplicity of backgrounds and experiences and who are impacted by the crossroad of several systems of domination. However, the national steering committee faces difficulties with identifying activists experiencing interlocking forms of oppression who would be interested in joining the decision-making body:

We find ourselves in a vicious circle whereby we are perceived as dominant, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-women, hence other women cannot

identify and do not join us and there is no evolution. Speaking with other volunteers, including other members of the national steering committee, they say ‘If I were a Black woman, I would probably join an Afro-Fem collective rather than #NousToutes’ (Sophie Barre, 5 October 2022).

This statement is confirmed by Yuna Miralles who states that “many people who have already considered the political impact of interlocking power systems and how they are socially situated within these power systems may choose to join more ‘radical’ collectives who have always been adopting this prism” (Yuna Miralles, 11 October 2022). She adds that, at #NousToutes, she finds herself having to put her experience as a lesbian woman at the background (*Ibidem*). Nathalie Meyer emphasises the necessity to “inquire about racial homogeneity within the national steering committee as we know that the persons who speak the best about it are those who are concerned by these forms of oppression. They are also the ones who are listened to” (Nathalie Meyer, 5 October 2022).

Lena Ben Ahmed also reports about the difficulty to enrol activists to enable a broad heterogeneity in the new steering committee membership, invoking the impossibility for some to dedicate a significant amount of time to activism: “We did not have to make a choice about the composition of the Committee, but yes, we are not satisfied about the representation” (Lena Ben Ahmed, 11 October 2022). Indeed, it is important to specify that all members of the national steering committee are volunteers and spend between 15 and 20 hours per week at #NousToutes. This observation also echoes how privilege impacts on the possibility of engaging in such highly demanding activity, in terms of time, energy and resources.

#NousToutes has always adopted an open approach to activism that enables anybody to easily join the collective, be it at a local or national level. In being attentive to open spaces for expression that would be safe and inclusive, members of the national steering committee wish to ensure that people who integrate the

committee do not strengthen the predominantly White and upper-class membership of this decision-making body as much as possible. However, it is important to highlight that inclusive politics of representation is not understood here as a performative tool. Rather, the goal of inclusive politics is to have a membership that better reflects the different realities experienced by *all* women. It is also hoped that strategies implemented at the external level will improve representativeness in decision-making bodies on the medium/long-term.

### ***5.3 Developing external strategies to operationalise the dismantlement of interlocking power systems as a framework for feminist collective action in #NousToutes***

#### ***5.3.1. The visibilisation of various axes of oppression in #NousToutes' communication and discourse***

#NousToutes endeavours to emphasise the visibilisation of the various power systems at stake in the perpetration of GBV as well as the intersecting identities and experiences through the content and the visual designs of its social media posts, website, stickers, protest banners, flyers, PowerPoints, etc. Amélie Terrien, who focuses more specifically on social media and communication at #NousToutes, is conscious of the risk of reproducing realities that are familiar to hers and, with her team implemented practical tools to avoid this pitfall:

In relation to visual representation, when we draw, we tend to represent people that look like us, white and young women with long hair. To avoid doing this, I made a list of all the characteristics that should appear on our visuals so the various skin colours, morphologies, visible physical disabilities, etc. And when we draw a group of people, we make sure that we systematically represent different profiles (see fig.1) (Amélie Terrien, 4 October 2022).



Fig. 1 - Sticker “Together against gender-based violence”, #NousToutes

As Amélie Terrien explains “Representation matters because all the internal strategies developed to foster greater intersectional analysis should be visible so that people can realise that there has been a change” (*Ibidem*).

Furthermore, attention to the way discourses can reinforce oppression is central to #NousToutes’ attempts to contribute to the dismantlement of power systems, or at least to mitigate its reproduction in a predominantly White, upper-class activist milieu. Amélie Terrien speaks about the necessity to account for feedback and cites the example of the vocabulary used to describe the hijab:



Some women wearing the hijab told us not to use the word ‘veil’ which is politically charged and associated with far-right movements in France. Rather, it is best to say ‘hijab’ or ‘scarf’. Some people also remind us of the racists and colonial origins of some terms as well as the potential sanist connotation of a particular word (*Ibidem*).

Another example would be to stop using the word “march” and rather speak about “protest” in all communication to ensure that disabled people who cannot march feel represented and welcomed to this mobilisation. #NousToutes has also been using inclusive writing for a few years in order to break away from the gender binary and to enable representation of people who do not identify with either the feminine or the masculine gender. All communications thus utilise the pronoun *iel* (they), a mix between *il* (he) and *elle* (she).

### 5.3.2. #NousToutes as a space of learning of interlocking power systems

At #NousToutes, formal learning on interlocking power systems occurs through various avenues including the organisation of events and webinars as well as the development of social media content. Indeed, the collective benefits from a wide audience and considers it as a responsibility to use this audience in order to raise awareness about interlocking power systems. A good example of this are #NousToutes’ workshops launched during the lockdown which have been attended by over 110 000 people (#NousToutes, replay Formations VSS1 & Culture du viol). Marie Fuentes explains that the necessity to educate the public about intersectionality “developed little by little. At first, we only had one slide about Crenshaw and the basic concept of intersectionality. Now, we added more information and resources, we talk about bell hooks for example” (Marie Fuentes, 8 October 2022) Beyond this, the workshops were also progressively enriched by a wider diversity of examples to illustrate how violence can emerge at the crossroads of several

forms of discrimination. This also speaks to a wider heterogeneity of people (*ibidem*).

The construction of this consciousness of the interlocking nature of power systems is intended to be conducted and/or informed by the work of experts who are impacted by the intersection of power systems themselves. Notably, in 2020, the annual November mobilisation proposed an online format of webinars due to Covid-19 restrictions and covered topics such as, *inter alia*, “GBV and racism” with Grace Ly, anti-racist feminist author and activist, “GBV and ableism” with Elisa Rojas, Franco-Chilean lawyer and anti-ableist activist as well as “feminism and lesbian struggles” with Silvia Casalino, Italian director and lesbian feminist activist and Joëlle Sambu Nzeba, lesbian Afro-feminist writer, poet and artist (#NousToutes, replay live Instagram, 21/11/2020).

Formal learning also happens on social media as a new mode of organising amidst #MeToo era and is also enabled through collaboration with other organisations or activists. It is about visibilising issues and share our platform with experts:

We try to post regularly about current issues, when it's pride month, when it's disability pride month, etc. We usually ask other organisations to help, they are more skilled and directly experience these oppressions. We also share other people's work to sensitise our community (Amélie Terrien, 4 October 2022)

### 5.3.3. *Coalition-building and alliances with key feminist organisations*

For #NousToutes, allyship politics is a crucial strategy to mitigate the - overwhelmingly White and upper-class feminist movements' habit to organise from the centre rather than from the margins. Lena Ben Ahmed explains: “Allies speak from experience, it's *their* daily expertise terrain, not ours. The mobilisations led and information shared by persons located at the crossroad of several oppression will always be more just and appropriate.” (Lena Ben Ahmed, 11 October 2022).

Several platforms and initiatives were created by the New Steering Committee as coalition-building spaces. In September 2021, the author of this paper and two other members of #NousToutes launched Signal(e), a monthly online interview series aiming at visibilising feminist initiatives on a variety of topics, inviting experts coming from diverse backgrounds. As part of this webinar series, #NousToutes interviewed, amongst others, three members of Les Hijabeuses, an organisation advocating for Muslim women's rights to wear the hijab in football competitions (#NousToutes, replay Signal(e), 31/03/2022), and two members of XY media, the first French trans-feminist media (#NousToutes, replay Signal(e), 27/01/2022) to speak about their work on how gender, race, islamophobia and LGBTQIA+phobia interlock. Signal(e) has been a successful platform not only to encourage interactive exchanges between these experts and members of #NousToutes' community but also to share further resources and to highlight the initiatives conducted by the participants in #NousToutes' newsletters sent to over 137 000 persons every month.

The creation of the "Inter-organisation Féminicides" also constitutes an example of coalition-building with the objective of organising together around a common goal, despite difficult historical relationships given that several members of the inter-orga Féminicides were members of #NousAussi in 2018 including Accept-T and Les Dévalideuses. The inter-organisation has been created following #NousToutes decision to broaden the scope of the counting of femicides in January 2022 (Ballet 2022). Marie Fuentes explains reports:

The objective of the new and more inclusive count down is to account for *all* femicides against *all* women including transwomen and, in *all* contexts, including prostitution for instance. It is more difficult to identify these specific femicides because the media usually cover and labels as femicides only those happening within the couple unit (Marie Fuentes 8 October 2022)

As such, allyship politics concretely enables in broadening the scope of the fight against GBV such as the crime of femicide relying on expertise-sharing and explicitly following “an approach sensitive to the multitude and at the crossroad of discrimination” while stating its recognition of “the importance to base [its] mobilisation on the necessity to account for the different systems of domination, including “racism, sexism, classism, ableism, psychophobia, LGBTQIA+phobia, fatphobia, agism, islamophobia, antisemitism, *putophobie* [discrimination against sex workers], xenophobia etc.” (Inter-Orga Féminicides 2022).

Even when #NousToutes does not co-organise an event, this coalitional approach implies that the collective proposes technical and logistic support when requested by allied organisations. This was the case when Les Hijabeuses organised a football game before the Senate to protest against the senators’ vote in favour of an amendment to the bill on sport aiming at prohibiting the hijab during competitions (Libération 2022). In addition, #NousToutes regularly supports and shares calls for mobilisations organised by its allies on its highly followed platform: “We usually share posts that are systematically developed by experts who are concerned by these oppressions. We sometimes do cross-posting, we tag them in a post or we share as a story” (Amélie Terrier, 4 October 2022).

#### *5.3.4. Accounting for different axes of oppression in street actions: the example of accessibility during the yearly protest*

Coalition-building also informs the way #NousToutes plans its various street actions including the yearly national protest, more particularly when it concerns accessibility. Several services have been put in place these past few years to enable a maximum of persons to protest in November with the implementation of the “quiet zone” such as:

Free taxis to come to and leave the protest, distribution of earplugs if the music is too loud, the possibility for people to rest in a van following the convoy. It's also about training a team of volunteers to ensure that the convoy is safe, to answer the protestors' needs and to accompany them back to the nearest metro or taxi station after the protest (Nathalie Meyer, 5 October 2022)

Les Dévalideuses, organisation focussing on the interlocking power systems of sexism and ableism are consulted to implement these services as a specialised organisation on the topic. As reported by Nathalie Meyer, "the objective is not that they do our job but rather share advice about what we are supposed to do coming from a place of experience and expertise" (*Ibidem*). Indeed, last year, protestors who benefitted from these services testified that they would not have come if these were not in place (*Ibidem*). Another important tool to foster everybody's participation is to, as much as possible and with the resources available to the collective, offer a French sign language translation, be it in live during the street actions or in the form of subtitles under videos published on social media.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper discussed how #NousToutes attempts to increasingly centre the dismantlement of interlocking power systems in the fight against GBV through the adoption of both organisational/internal and external strategies. Acknowledging intersectionality as a concept emerging from American Black Liberation movements that seeks to explain how the gender, race and class axes intersect to form a new discrimination, the feminist collective establishes strategies to expand the scope of this concept to its predominantly White and upper-class activism while mitigating the phenomenon of appropriation.

The development of such a framework is a work in progress and the author hopes that this paper serves as a basis for critical discussion with other feminist movements, in France and beyond. It specifically calls for activist movements tackling interlocking forms of power systems, especially racism, classism and sexism to engage in a critical analysis of the approach proposed here. Further research will be necessary to assess the long-term impact of the implementation of this framework within the feminist and anti-GBV movements in France.

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