

TOOLKIT for Structural Inequality

What is structural inequality?

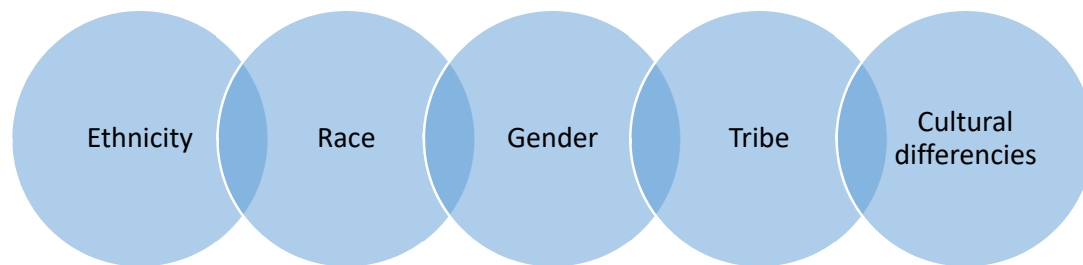
Structural inequality refers to a system where prevailing social institutions offer an unfair or prejudicial distinction between different segments of the population in a specific society. Such an unfair distinction is rooted in social practices, laws and regulations, as well as in government policies and politics, which may eventually cause consequences in terms of access to equal or fair opportunity in socio-political and economic atmosphere.

Who does it affect?

Structural inequality affects to one specific group of people that are systematically disadvantaged or attributed an unequal status compared to other groups with which they coexist. These are minority or subordinated groups.

What is the discrimination based on?

The groups are systematically disadvantaged or attributed to an unequal status, compared with other groups based on ethnicity, race, gender, tribe, cultural differences, wealth, etc. These nominators can be used to distinguish minority/subordinated groups from majority/dominant groups.



What are the specific groups that are affected by structural inequality?

Groups, who have persistently experienced social disadvantage or attributed an unequal status, are Indigenous Peoples, persons of color, other racial/ethnic/cultural minorities, women, poor, etc. These groups experience structural inequality on contrary to most advantaged social groups in the society.

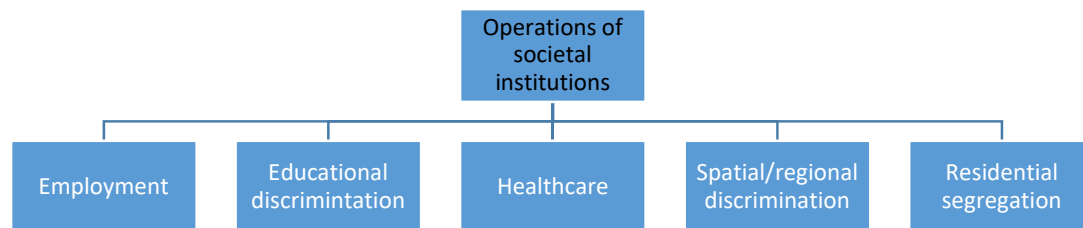
What makes the structural discrimination possible?

Social, cultural and economic subordination arise as a result of these groups' positions in a larger socioeconomic structure in which they lack the power, control, resources, and opportunities to better their conditions. These minority or subordinated groups are in disadvantaged or unequal position because they have less power than the majority/dominant groups.

Where does it occur?

Structural inequality occurs in, and is reinforced by, unequal relations in rights, social policies, societal roles, functions, decisions, opportunities, etc. For example, laws can potentially construct structural forms of inequality.

These unequal relations are systemically rooted in the normal operations of dominant social institutions. The operations of societal institutions can be divided into categories like employment, educational discrimination, healthcare, spatial/regional discrimination, residential segregation.



How can we identify structures that cause inequalities?

It is difficult to identify structures that cause inequality precisely because discrimination is embedded in normal operations of dominant social institutions. The manifestation of inequality, for example in employment, appears through access, quality, etc. Unequal structures can be identified by recognizing significant gaps, particularly in employment, social integration, and the creation of an enabling environment.

Why is it important to identify structures that cause inequality?

It is important to identify structures that cause inequality to reduce practices that are, in fact, harmful to the societies. These inequalities prevent many countries, and societal groups within countries, from realizing their full potential, undermine the effectiveness of social policy and may undermine the sustainable development outcomes. Inequalities can have enormous cost on

society, and societal groups, in terms of regressed development, declined social and cultural environments as well as increased risk of social instability and conflict. Deconstruction of structural inequality can potentially improve the social, cultural and natural as well as economic, legal, political, and institutional environment for sustainable social development.

How can we deconstruct structures that cause inequality?

Overcoming structural inequality often requires broad, (social) policy-based structural reform on behalf of governmental organization. It requires a variety of public interventions including affirmative action, targeted and tailored programs, and institutional reforms for a more inclusive social policy with enhanced opportunities for racial/ethnic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, women, poor and other disadvantaged groups.

The key to success is that the public policies, institutions and programs are inclusive, responsive, and accessible. Such policies should provide each group in the society with means to claim their rights, the opportunity for upward mobility, and the ability to participate in sustainable development. This involves the transformation of subjects and beneficiaries into citizens with rights and responsibilities. The unequal structures can be demolished by creating equitable opportunities for all groups in the society and social justice.

What is gender-based structural inequality?

Gender-based structural inequality is embedding of gender inequalities in social structures, based on institutionalized conceptions of gender differences.

Gender-based structural inequality refers to a specific group of people that are systematically disadvantaged or attributed to an unequal status in society based on gender. The basic idea is that differences between genders allow different kinds of treatment. Structural inequality based on gender occurs and gender differences are deeply rooted in the normal operations of dominant social institutions, such as employment and education.

Conceptions of gender differences include conceptions of masculinity and femininity, ideas concerning expectations of women and men, internalized judgments of women's and men's actions, prescribed rules about the proper behavior of women and men.

These conceptions of gender differences, and more, encompass societal institutions and construct structural forms of inequality.

Gender-based structural inequality takes many forms, including sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and unequal pay/opportunity to earn livelihood for women who practice the same professions as men.

What is structural inequality in the context of Indigenous Peoples?

Indigenous Peoples are arguably among the most disadvantaged groups in the world. In most of the countries in the world they form a minority and/or hold a subordinated position. They are disadvantaged or attributed to an unequal status based on ethnicity, race, tribe and cultural differences, etc.

Indigenous Peoples have been experiencing structural inequalities as they were colonized since time immemorial. Colonialism refers to the structured relationship of domination and subordination. The aim of the nation-state or colonizer is to extend or retain authority and power over other segments of people, on land and territories through colonial rules, such as policies and laws. The discrimination has worked toward eliminating cultural diversity - outright exclusion, inclusion with unequal status/conditions or assimilating indigenous identity and culture with a dominant one.

Colonialism, and denial of their rights as distinct cultures, is largely responsible of Indigenous Peoples position in larger socio-economic structure in which they lack power, rights over land, territories, (natural) resources and equal opportunities to improve their conditions in their own term in contrast to a majority or dominant groups, and unequal relations that still exist in the society. Structural inequality shows in rates of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and violence are high, and overall life expectancy for Indigenous People is less than that among whites. Ultimately Indigenous Peoples lack adequate opportunity to practice their language or traditional culture and livelihoods.

It is important to identify and overcome unequal structures in order for Indigenous Peoples to maintain their indigenous distinctiveness against the homogenizing forces of nation-states and corporations. “Positive discrimination” (a.k.a. “affirmative action”) is an important tool in overcoming structural inequality. It refers to the act of giving advantages to members of those groups that have been treated unfairly in the past, where the objective is to ensure everyone has equal opportunities. Indigenous Peoples' collective rights to self-determination, culture, territories, lands and (natural) resources, etc. were developed under international law to serve this purpose.

What is gender-based structural inequality in the context of Indigenous Peoples?

Indigenous women face the same structural inequalities as Indigenous men but they also encounter barriers based on gender. For this reason, Indigenous women live under two levels of subordination: that of majority/dominant cultural group, and men as a group. It is often highlighted that indigenous women are triply marginalized, first as a woman, then as an indigenous person and finally as an indigenous woman.

Source: Deconstructing Structural Inequality: Gender Equality in Reindeer Herding Sámi Communities project. Arctic Centre, University of Lapland.
<https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/projects/structuralinequality>