

IP0607 Transcript

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What if I told you that giving women money doesn't automatically give them power?

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That a loan can empower or quietly reproduce the very inequalities it claims to fix?

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In this episode, we're asking whether economic empowerment is really the fast track to gender equality or whether it's been oversold as a neat, market-friendly solution to a deeply political problem.

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We'll talk micro-credit, land, migration, climate change and why gender equality isn't just about jobs –

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It's about who gets to decide how the world works.

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I'm Aurora Brown and this is Intersectional Psychology.

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Let's get into it.

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Aurora Brown and Intersectional Psychology acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of country throughout South Africa and their connections to land, water and community.

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We pay our respects to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Indigenous people listening today.

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Episode 7

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Is economic empowerment the most important route to gender equality?

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Hello and welcome back to Intersectional Psychology, a podcast where we ask psychology, development, and social policy to please explain themselves...

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And then we try to fact-check the explanation.

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Today's episode asks a question that sounds simple, sensible and very grant application-friendly.

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Is economic empowerment the most important route to gender equality?

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And I want to be upfront –

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If you've ever heard someone say, "Just give women money and everything will sort itself out,"

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this episode is for you... and also about you.

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Because while economic empowerment matters deeply, treating it as the solution to gender inequality risks missing the actual problem.

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Or worse, neatly repackaging inequality in feminist branding and calling it progress.

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So today we're going to zoom out and then zoom right back in, looking at gender and development broadly and then very specifically through an African and South African context.

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Gender and development: What are we actually talking about?

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Let's start with the basics.

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In gender and development discourse, one of the most popular claims is that increasing women's economic power leads to better outcomes for everyone –

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Better health, better education, stronger communities.

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And to be clear, that's not wrong.

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But here's the problem:

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Mainstream development strategies often define empowerment so narrowly that it becomes almost decorative, as if empowerment means participation, not power.

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As if putting women into markets automatically dismantles the structures that exploit them.

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So you'll see policies that celebrate a woman entering the labour force without asking, "What kind of work, under what conditions, with what protection?"

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And crucially, "Who still holds the power once she gets there?"

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This is where feminist scholars start raising eyebrows.

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Because when empowerment is reduced to income generation alone, it ignores the sociocultural constraints that limit women's autonomy.

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Things like inheritance laws and traditions.

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Racialised land ownership.

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Caregiving burdens.

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Credit discrimination.

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And histories of colonial extraction that didn't magically disappear when women got bank accounts.

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In other words, not all women start the race at the same (bread)line.

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And pretending they do is not neutral, it's political.

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Neoliberal feminism:

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When empowerment comes with fine print.

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One of the sharpest critiques in this space comes from scholars who argue that what we often call, quote, "women's empowerment", unquote, is actually neoliberal empowerment.

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This is the version where women are encouraged to be entrepreneurial.

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Structural inequality is politely ignored.

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And poverty becomes an individual failure rather than a systemic outcome.

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It's the logic of, "Well, if she works hard enough, she'll succeed..."

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And if she doesn't, well, we gave her the chance.”

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But this kind of thinking quietly leaves patriarchal norms intact.

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It doesn't challenge violence, exploitation, or unpaid care work and household labour.

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It just asks women to manage those realities more efficiently.

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And yes, policies will often focus on women's participation in labour markets without touching the normative beliefs that frame women as subordinate, dependent, or endlessly responsible for someone else's well-being.

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So no, a payslip does not automatically translate into freedom – especially if the same structure still decides who owns land, who controls the income and who makes household decisions, and who absorbs the consequences when things go wrong.

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Agriculture, migration, and the multiple layers of exclusion.

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Nowhere is this more visible than in agriculture and migration.

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Rural women, particularly women of colour, experience exclusion at the intersection of gender, race, class, and colonial legacies.

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They are often primary food producers, water carriers, and land stewards, without owning the land that they depend on.

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Migration is often framed as a pathway to empowerment.

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But for many women, migration increases vulnerability – to labour exploitation, to social isolation, to xenophobia and ethnophobia, to housing precarity, to sexual exploitation.

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And here's the kicker: Migration policies usually see women as workers, not as caregivers, community leaders, or political agents.

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Their unpaid labour disappears from the ledger, even though entire economies depend on it.

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Urban planning then joins the problem by prioritising the formal economy, while women are forced into informal, low-wage work with minimal protection.

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Poor housing, unsafe transport, and lack of services don't just inconvenience women. They lock inequality into place.

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Climate change: Gendered, political, and not accidental.

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Climate change adds another layer. Women, especially rural women, are often responsible for managing natural resources like water and food.

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They are also disproportionately affected by environmental degradation, displacement, and food insecurity.

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And yet, their knowledge is sidelined, their labour is unpaid or underpaid, their voices are absent from environmental policymaking.

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Instead, large-scale commercial agriculture – usually male-dominated – gets prioritised.

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Not because it's more sustainable, but because it aligns with power.

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So when we talk about sustainability without talking about gender, we're again not being neutral.

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We're being selective.

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Women's issues... or power relations?

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Historically, development framed gender inequality as a woman's problem –

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Fix the woman, educate them, employ them, micro-finance them, and the problem disappears.

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Except it didn't.

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Because gender inequality isn't about women lacking skills.

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It's about power relations, who controls resources, whose labour counts, and whose voices shape policy.

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Intersectionality helps us see how gender interacts with race, class, disability, sexuality, and citizenship, producing very different experiences of marginalisation.

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And development policies that ignore these intersections don't just fail, they often reproduce inequality under the guise of progress.

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In African contexts, this is especially visible in land ownership, political participation, and access to education and health care.

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Patriarchal systems still restrict women's access to resources, even when laws appear gender-neutral.

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Because laws don't enforce themselves – people do. And people bring culture, bias, and power with them.

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Can women's economic empowerment be the answer?

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Let's be fair. Economic empowerment matters.

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Micro-finance has helped many women increase their income, invest in their families, and participate more actively in household decision-making.

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In South Africa and elsewhere, financial literacy and access to capital have created real opportunities.

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But, and it's a big but, economic empowerment is not politically neutral.

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Micro-credit can depoliticise poverty by framing inequality as an individual problem to be solved through entrepreneurship.

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It can shift attention away from education, health care, land rights, and violence.

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And in some cases, it simply transfers financial risk onto women, while men retain control over finances.

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Some women don't even control the loans they're responsible for repaying.

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So when empowerment adds debt, workload, and responsibility, without redistributing power, we need to ask, "Empowerment for whom?"

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Beijing Platform: Progress, but not enough.

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Since the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, there has been progress.

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Greater political representation, stronger legal frameworks, increased economic participation.

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South Africa's constitution is rightly celebrated.

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And yet, we still haven't had a woman president. Gender-based violence remains endemic.

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Legal protections exist, but enforcement is uneven.

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Representation without power is not liberation.

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It's optics.

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What still needs to change, and how do we change it?

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Gender equality will not be achieved through microfinance alone.

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Gender equality will not be achieved through microcredit alone, or employment alone, or legislation alone.

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It requires structural change, redistribution of power, enforcement of rights, cultural transformation, and, yes, rethinking gender itself.

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Because ultimately, this isn't just about women and other marginalised genders catching up to men.

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It's about asking, "Why is power gendered in the first place?"

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Would some men feel threatened by women owning land, making decisions, and shaping policy?

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History answers that question very clearly:

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"Yes!" Which means the work of gender equality isn't just economic.

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It's psychological, political, and cultural – and deeply relational.

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And maybe, just maybe, it starts with teaching our children a different story about what it means to be men, women, or simply human beings.

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Not competitors, not threats, but co-creators of community.

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Before we wrap up, I want to ask a slightly uncomfortable question.

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What if empowerment doesn't always feel empowering?

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What if earning more just means carrying more – more responsibility, more pressure, more risk, without actually having more control?

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In the bonus episode, we're getting into the psychology of power without freedom.

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Why having choices isn't the same as being able to use them.

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And what really has to shift for empowerment to mean something more than survival with better branding?

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If that sounds like a conversation you're not quite ready to have, it's probably the one you need.

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Just go to Patreon.com/IntersectionalPsychology.

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And with that, we come to the end of the series.

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Not because the work is finished, but because the conversation has been properly opened.

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If you have any questions or thoughts, please reach out to [intersectionalsychologypod\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:intersectionalsychologypod@gmail.com) or join the conversation at Patreon.com/IntersectionalPsychology.

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Until then, remember everyone has the right to live with their optimal mental health.

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This episode of Intersectional Psychology was researched, written, recorded and edited by me, Aurora Brown.

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You can also check the website or the show notes for a full list of references for this episode.

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A video of this episode with closed captions is available on YouTube.com/@IntersectionalPsychology.

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You can also chat with me on BlueSky at intersectpsych.bsky.social and Instagram, Facebook or TikTok at @IntersectionalPsychology. But mostly BlueSky.

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Aurora Brown and Intersectional Psychology are committed to the Cite Black Women Praxis.

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I, Aurora Brown, am not able to answer specific questions about individual situations.

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Always seek the advice of your health provider with any questions you may have regarding a mental health condition.

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Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have heard or seen on this podcast.

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If you think you need immediate assistance, please call your local emergency number or any mental health crisis hotline.

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Everyone deserves good mental health.