

Angela Babb: What do I think when I hear the phrase 'inequalities'? I think about not having enough food to eat. And I think about not having enough food because there is no job. Having no job means you can't make ends meet because there is not enough money to live on. It means getting by and living day-to-day.

In other words, the phrase 'inequalities' makes me think about the system. Children and their families get trapped in poverty, and that's the fault of the system. Why do I blame the system? Many people like to say that we are dependent on benefits because they make life easy. But that's not true. We are not dependent on benefits – we are trapped on benefits and trapped in the system.

I want to work; but left school without the qualifications I need. And who will employ me without qualifications? I try to change this. I have done courses at a local community centre to try and get qualifications so that I can get work. So to get equal access to jobs, what people need is more support to make that next step.

But even before looking for a job, why do some young people leave school without qualifications? Going to school is important. Kids need to get a good education because it will help them find a job when they are older. If they can find a job then they can earn money, pay their own bills and become independent. But not all children have equal chances of succeeding in school.

In London, for example, students are supposed to have zipcards to pay for their transportation to school. But two and a half years ago, my daughters had no zipcards. This meant that they could be thrown off the bus. That made them late for school, and sometimes it made them miss school altogether. The school complained about their poor attendance.

It's fair to say that it was disrupting their education. They were missing out. And when you're late, I think the whole class gets disrupted. But I don't remember the school ever asking if they could help.

I realised that we needed a plan to get their zipcards sorted out but it was not easy. Firstly, you have to apply online but I had no computer at home and no way to get online. I had to ask for help. Second, you also need an email address to apply for zipcards. But I didn't have one because I don't have a computer. So we had to create an email account for me.

Third, to apply for a zipcard, I needed the girls' birth certificate and passport-sized photos too. We had lost the birth certificates a long time ago so we had to order them replaced and that cost money. And we didn't have any passport-sized photos so we had to buy them as well. So please do not tell me that education is free. Just to finally get my daughters the zipcards they needed to travel to school, I had to spend a lot of money at a time when we had trouble paying the rent on our flat.

That's an example of one kind of inequality: unequal access to a resource that is supposed to be for everyone. Another example of inequality is about blame. When you live in poverty, you always get blamed for your situation and told that it is your fault that your children are growing up in poverty. When society says that child poverty is caused by bad parents, I feel society is trying to blame me for my situation. The system traps us and then blames us for being trapped. But society should be supporting us instead. Is it all my fault that I left school without the qualifications I need? Or is some of it the fault of the system too? When the failings of the system are

blamed on parents, all that does is undermine the family unit.

The support that families get is unequal too. You can see your child struggling year after year, but not actually receive a diagnosis of autism until he turns 17.

And if you are struggling to help your children, sometimes the only response from social services is to remove the children from your custody. If that happens, it might be many years before you can see your own children again, and before they're allowed to see their brothers and sisters. By then, there's been so much strain and stress that you have to get to know them all over again.

A good parent can live in poverty and offer their child all the love they can give. A bad parent can have all the money in the world and never give their child the attention they need. I may live in poverty but I still fight for my kids and for what they need. My children have seen me struggle and I want a better future for them. More than anything, I want them to have a good education and to be able to go to college or university. I want them to be happy in anything they choose to do. I want them to make the most of the opportunities that I never had.

My mum was born in Venezuela but moved to London as a little girl. She worked in a school as a dinner lady who cooked and served meals. She also worked in the city cleaning office buildings. We mums have to be strong for our kids. We always focus on our kids; we put ourselves last. If we're not strong for them, how can they ever overcome inequality?

Diana Skelton: Last year, my friend, Martine Le Corre, and I were invited to speak as part of a day-long conference on “intersectionality” at Paris 8 University. There were speakers about many aspects of identity that are linked to oppression and discrimination: gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexuality, disability, and illness. What Martine and I spoke about was the intersection between gender and the violence of extreme poverty. One of our points was that many feminist movements remain driven by the concerns of middle-class women, with almost no attention given to the issue cited as the most vital by women living in poverty in western Europe: the patriarchy of social services.

Many people told us they appreciated our talk—but one participant was frustrated that we did not differentiate the experience of black women. She said, “Whenever race isn’t named, black women are lost.” She’s right; but Martine was very frustrated by the conversation with her, because she feels that women in poverty, of any skin color, also get lost too easily.

Martine grew up in extreme poverty. At age 18, she says, “I had ended up believing that I wasn’t worth much, that I was a ‘misfit,’ ‘antisocial,’ just dirt poor and nothing but poor. [...] I had never felt allowed to use words [like intelligence and knowledge] about myself.” But Martine has a keen intelligence, and since then, she has spent forty years investing it on behalf of all those she calls “my people.” Her people may be anywhere in the world, but they have in common growing up with the feeling that they are useless, nothing expected of them. The talk we gave together was about an action-research project that Martine co-directed showing that poverty is a form of violence. In our talk, Martine spoke about her neighbor who is insulted at every turn. Told that she is unworthy of raising her own children, the neighbor was made to listen silently to a roomful of social service staff listing her every fault and then accused of violence and led away by security officers when finally she slammed a cup on the table in frustration. “Treating her that way is institutional violence that destroys lives,” Martine said, “but what is done to us is never considered violence. Calling it violence would disturb society. So the violence done to us stays invisible. Enough! Extreme poverty is violence, society can’t accept it any longer.”

So often people who grow up in poverty share Martine's experience of not considering herself worthy or smart. In the face of prejudice and judgement, they are told to keep quiet and listen. Their attempts to break the silence can be considered violent.

"Whitesplaining" happens when white people hijack conversations about racism by trying to speak in the place of people of color. Men who speak in a patronizing way to women are "mansplaining." So should we invent a word to describe what happens when people in poverty are patronized in the same way? Maybe "top-downsplaining"?

What all social justice movements need is for each person to be heard speaking about her or his own experience, and for people without personal experience of being marginalized to become allies. It's in the word "ally" that we can find a powerful connection with the same social justice movements that don't yet have a word for the silencing of people in poverty. Ten years ago, in English, the word "ally" was hardly ever used outside of the context of World War II history.

But in 2007, it was added to the Urban Dictionary of modern slang to mean "a person who is not gay but supports the rights of lesbian, gay, transsexual and bisexual people." Today, that definition has been broadened to other marginalized groups and also sharpened to include making it clear that a good ally has a very specific role.

Francesca Ramsey hosts MTV's "Decoded", a vlog about overcoming racism and other prejudice. She defines the role of an ally as:

"someone who wants to fight for the equality of a marginalized group that they're not a part of. ... An ally's job is to support. You want to make sure that you use your privilege and your voice to educate others but make sure to do it in such a way that does not speak over the community members that you're trying to support or take credit for things that they are already saying. Speak up but not over."

In 1970, Steve Biko, a black anti-Apartheid activist who was later tortured and murdered by the South African police, described the role he saw for white liberals:

"The role of the white liberal in the black man's history in South Africa is a curious one. Very few black organisations were not under white direction. True to their image, the white liberals always knew what was good for the blacks and told them so. That bunch of do-gooders goes under all sorts of names liberals, leftists etc. These are the people who argue that they are not responsible for white racism. All true liberals should realise that the place for their fight for justice is within their white society. The liberal must apply himself with absolute dedication to the idea of educating his white brothers that the history of the country may have to be rewritten [so] that we may live in a country where colour will not serve to put a man in a box."

Both Francesca Ramsey's and Steve Biko's words call to mind the vision of Joseph Wresinski. He was a man born into extreme poverty who grew up to found All Together in Dignity/ATD Fourth World. He called for:

"a new alliance between established members of society and people in poverty. To be faithful to this alliance, we will follow through completely our challenge to any of society's projects that exclude the weakest. We will impose, in every field, the participation of the most disadvantaged, denouncing everything that puts a person in a situation of inferiority and leads to his rejection by others, [and calling for] a project for the whole of society in the name of defending the most underprivileged and the respect of their rights."

Allies of people in poverty have an important role to play in challenging their own colleagues, neighbors or relatives but it is also crucial that they make room for others to hear the voices of people in poverty directly, without silencing or interpreting people's words.

After our day at Paris 8 University, Martine said, “When she was shouting at us, I kept thinking of my people. It’s that kind of attitude that can divide us, helping politicians who want to pit us against each other, breaking solidarity.” An ally of ATD Fourth World in New York, Rosa Cho, spoke to us about a time when she felt that a group of protestors was pitting different causes against one another. But when she gained some distance from her first emotions, she says she realized, “my own subjectivity is ill-equipped to understand and feel the depth of their particular pains, sense of desperation, hopelessness, and not-understoodness.”

All of us need solidarity so badly. There are many forms of prejudice and of systematic oppression that damage the whole of society by short-circuiting people’s potential and ignoring the contributions they make. In order to strive toward solidarity, maybe it is important for each of us to explore more fully what it means for us to become an ally to someone whose personal experience of oppression, prejudice, and “not-understoodness” is different from our own.