

Intersectionality is a Power Analysis

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality” to feminist theory nearly 30 years ago, describing the “intersectional experience” as something “greater than the sum of racism and sexism.”

She says. “In every generation and in every intellectual sphere and in every political moment, there have been African American women who have articulated the need to think and talk about race through a lens that looks at gender, or think and talk about feminism through a lens that looks at race.”

“There are many, many different kinds of intersectional exclusions — not just black women, but other women of color,” Crenshaw said. “Not just people of color, but people with disabilities. Immigrants. LGBTQ people. Indigenous people. The way we imagine discrimination or disempowerment often is more complicated for people who are subjected to multiple forms of exclusion.”

For Crenshaw, a law professor at UCLA and Columbia, intersectionality theory came about specifically to address a particular problem. “It’s important to clarify that the term was used to capture the applicability of black feminism to anti-discrimination law,” she says. She brought up the case of *Degraffenreid vs General Motors*, in which five black women sued GM on the grounds of race and gender discrimination. “The particular challenge in the law was one that was grounded in the fact that anti-discrimination law looks at race and gender separately. The consequence of that is when African American women or any other women of color experience either compound or overlapping discrimination, the law initially just was not there to come to their defense.”

The courts’ thinking was that black women could not prove gender discrimination because not all women were discriminated against, and they couldn’t prove race discrimination because not all black people were discriminated against. A compound discrimination suit would, in the courts’ eyes, constitute preferential treatment, something nobody else could do. Crenshaw laughs when she adds: “Of course, no one else *had* to do that. Intersectionality was a way of addressing what it was that the courts weren’t seeing.”

Cases like these informed much of her earlier work on intersectionality – trying to show how these African American plaintiffs’ arguments rested on the ability to show that the discrimination they were experiencing was the combination of two different kinds of policies. But there was an additional point to the theory as well: pointing out that the tools being used to remedy the overlapping discrimination – anti-discrimination law - were themselves inadequate. “You’ve got to show that the kind of discrimination people have conceptualized is limited because they stop their thinking when the discrimination encounters another kind of discrimination,” she says. “I wanted to come up with a common everyday metaphor that people could use to say: “it’s well and good for me to understand the kind of discriminations that occur along this avenue, along this axis - but what happens when it flows into another axis, another avenue?”

No discussion of Crenshaw's work can be complete without discussing the congressional hearings of October 1991, organized to address the claim that Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed a colleague, Anita Hill. In his denial of the allegations, Thomas said it was a “high tech lynching”. Crenshaw was part of the legal team that represented Hill - and arguably changed the course of history with regards to the recognition of sexual harassment in the workplace.

“When we were defending Anita Hill, it was it felt like there was 10 of us against the whole world,” she says. “There was overwhelming criticism of Anita Hill from Clarence Thomas’s camp, the Republican camp, from the White House, from the senate judiciary committee. And the Democrats were not defending her.” Thomas’s ‘lynching’ comment, she says, communicated to many African Americans this was a race issue - leaving Hill with no base to rally. “Lynching is representative of the quintessential moment of racism - and that in turn centers African American male experiences,” she says.

One consequence of this was Anita Hill’s claim being taken up by mainstream white feminists - only she was stripped of her race, reinforcing the idea that the case was a race vs. gender issue. “She simply became a colorless woman, and we as African American women feminists were trying to say, “you cannot talk about this just in gender terms - you have to be intersectional - there is a long history you cannot ignore,” but they didn't have the skills to be able to talk about it,” she says.

Crenshaw recalls the strong anti-harassment work of the civil rights movement, and speaks of a “certain ahistoricism” in some of the conversations around feminism and anti-racism work. “Intersectionality was something I wrote in 1986, ‘87 and there’s whole generation now that has come to the conversation after black feminism and other forms of intersectional work tilled the soil,” she says. “And I think sometimes it’s hard for people to imagine what the world was like at the point when none of that work had been done.

What appears above is an edited synthesis derived from the following two sources:

Kimberlé Crenshaw Explains The Power Of Intersectional Feminism In 1 Minute, by [Hayley Miller](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectional-feminism_us_598de38de4b090964296a34d): https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectional-feminism_us_598de38de4b090964296a34d

Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality: “I wanted to come up with an everyday metaphor that anyone could use,” By [Bim Adewunmi](https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could): <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could>