

The Origin of the Term Intersectionality

In Part 2 of our series on intersectional feminism Marlene introduces Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of Intersectionality

by Marlene Obst

Last week, [I wrote](#) on a reading by Leyla Yenirce, a feminist, who says “The future is not female, but intersectional”. On my journey to learn more about intersectional feminism, the origin of the movement, and the term itself, I cannot leave Kimberlé Crenshaw out. She actually is the one, who first combined the term intersectionality with feminism.

Kimberlé Crenshaw challenged and continues to challenge the way feminist theory and particularly the American anti-discrimination laws view discrimination of women of colour.

In 1989, aspects like race and gender were seen as completely separated cases of discrimination. Aiming to highlight that these aspects were experienced not separately but simultaneously, Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in her essay with the telling title [“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics”](#).

Today Kimberlé Crenshaw is a professor of Law at Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles. She is a prominent civil rights advocate and founder of the African American Policy Forum (AAPF). Over the past decades, Crenshaw has written extensively on black feminist legal theory and issues regarding racism.

To illustrate the concept of intersectionality, Crenshaw often refers to the legal case “DeGraffenreid vs. General Motors”. In 1976, a group of African American women, including Emma DeGraffenreid, sued General Motors for discrimination. The women argued that they experienced combined discrimination. They were excluded from work opportunities based on their race and gender. The women's argument was that at General Motors, women only became secretaries and secretarial positions were only offered to white women. But the courts looked separately at the allegations of racial and gender discrimination: The employment of African American male factory workers disproved racial discrimination. The employment of white female office workers disproved gender discrimination. The court decided to not consider the issue of combined discrimination and dismissed the case.

In the context of this dismissal the term intersectionality was born and added to the “*complex structure of anti-discrimination law*”, as Crenshaw wrote in 2015. By creating a terminology for the complex manner in

which the effects of different forms of discrimination can overlap or amplify each other in one person — in this particular context: in one black woman —, Crenshaw sought to simplify the issue making it easier to understand and discuss. *“Intersectionality, then, was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should — highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced,”* wrote Crenshaw.

Over the years the terms usage to describe the multiple forms of discrimination African American women have to experience widened. Now it is used to point out a wide range of intersectional exclusions also including categories like disability, religion, and sexuality.

Today, the term Crenshaw coined nearly 30 years ago appears to be everywhere. It looks like its creator starts to question whether the concepts interpretation and its use by some groups is still directed towards highlighting and overcoming intersectional exclusions. *„If women and girls of colour continue to be left in the shadows, something vital to the understanding of intersectionality has been lost,”* she wrote in 2015. Crenshaw has repeatedly argued that intersectionality needs to be part of all social movements to avoid that only experiences by certain groups influence all conversations about discrimination. Perspectives of those, who are subjected to multiple forms of oppression, could easily be left out. But: *“Intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term”*, Crenshaw claims.

Intersectionality has been a concept strongly debated within feminist communities. The term itself has provided a banner under which to discuss identity and its relationship to power. But as Kimberlé Crenshaw put it **“a term can do no more than those who use it have the power to demand”**.

So where does that leave me now? While reading about the topic I came across a hand full of articles by prominent female activists who have left the intersectional movement. They argue that the designation „intersectional feminist“ has become merely a jargon, a buzzword, something people use to elevate themselves and claim to identify with but not actually understand. Some go as far as claiming the concept has been appropriated by white feminists who now use it to silence women of colour.

The idea that mainstream feminism still cannot comprehend that racism and sexism among other aspects are not experienced separately but simultaneously is something I want to look at in my next text. Looking at prominent feminist movements today it seems to me that some have yet to acknowledge the fact that white women and their experiences are still all too often the only point of departure for all conversations about discrimination towards women.

Kimberlé Crenshaw sums up that problem as such: *„Being front and center in conversations about racism or sexism is a complicated privilege that is often hard to see.”*

To find my own position in the feminist movement, I will need to follow the debate.

next time: Intersectional Feminism - Debate and Controversy

[Part 1: The Future Is Not Female](#)



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