

What is ... INTERSECTIONALITY

“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

Audre Lorde, “Learning from the 60’s.”

Speech given during the Malcolm X weekend, Harvard University, February, 1982

What is Intersectionality?

A dictionary definition is that it is “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups (*Merriam-Webster Online* <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality>)

Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term, describes intersectionality as “a lens, a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.” She argues that some people experience multiple forms of discrimination (based on race, gender, immigration status, etc.) and that their experience is “not just the sum of these parts.” <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>

Where did the term come from?

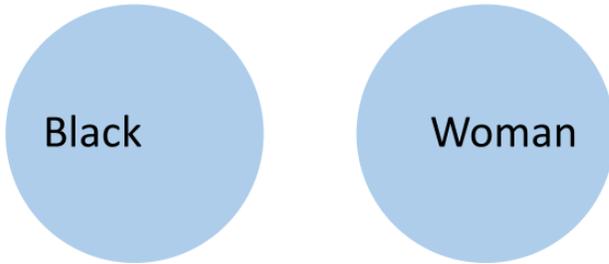
Ms. Crenshaw coined the term in a 1989 legal analysis of three court cases in which Black women filed discrimination lawsuits against the companies employing them. The courts ruled in favor of the companies and argued that the women plaintiffs had not:

1. The women plaintiffs had not shown that Black women were a special protected group under the applicable law; or
2. Shown a pattern of discrimination of an existing protected group. The courts noted that the companies employed both Black individuals and women. So there was no pattern of discrimination against Blacks and no pattern of discrimination against women.

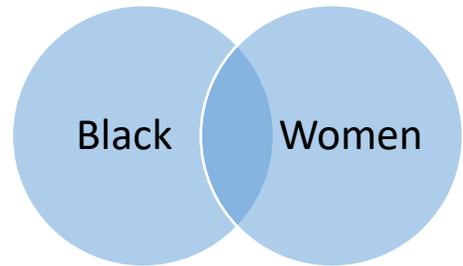
However, Ms. Crenshaw, who was not involved in the cases, argued that the courts had missed an important point. In her analysis of the cases she argued that discrimination had occurred, not because the plaintiffs were Black **OR** women but because they were Black **AND** women. In other words, because of the “intersection” of race and gender.

What does this mean more generally”

With this as a background, intersectionality can be seen as circles of discrimination. In the cases analyzed by Ms. Crenshaw, the courts viewed the circles as separate, as shown in this diagram.



In terms of Ms. Crenshaw’s description of intersectionality, however, the circles should be viewed as overlapping. The result is a particular form of discrimination. Sometimes Black women experience discrimination that is similar to Black men (the circle on the left in this diagram) and sometimes similar to white women (the circle on the right). But sometimes Black women experience discrimination that is not exactly like that of either Black men or white women. That is, discrimination is not always a matter of race **OR** gender.



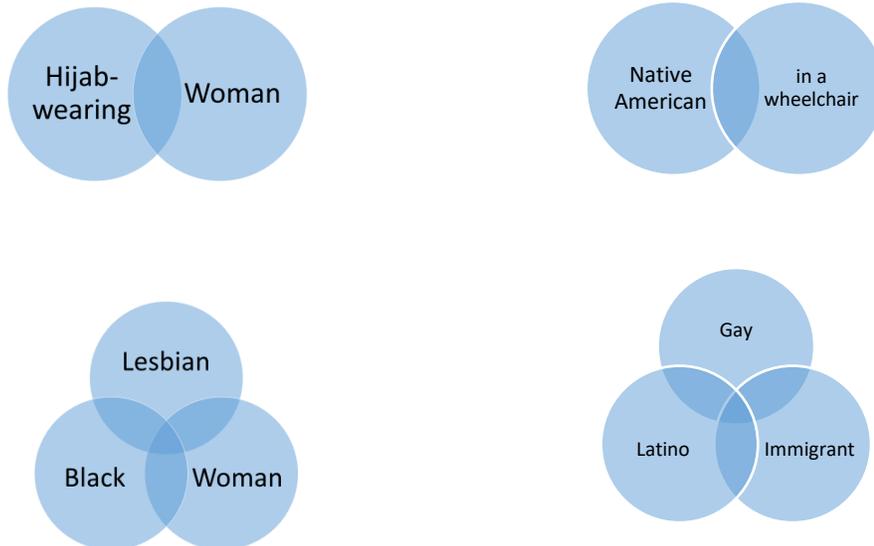
Sometimes it’s a matter of race **AND** gender – the overlapping part of the diagram. As an example, a 2020 AAUW report presents women’s wages as a percentage of white non-Hispanic men’s wages. <https://www.aauw.org/resources/research/simple-truth/>

Asian women	87%
White women	79%
Black women	63%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander women	63%
American Indian or Alaska Native women	60%
Hispanic women	55%

Note that while white women earn 79% of what white men earn, Black women earn even less, 63% of what white men earn.

Over time, intersectionality has been applied to other forms of discrimination. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended, prohibits discrimination based on race, color, religion, gender, pregnancy, national origin, or age. <https://workology.com/what-are-the-protected-classes-under-title-vii-and-the-civil-rights-act-of-1964/>

This means that various circles of discrimination can overlap in various ways, as shown in the following diagrams. In addition, various forms of discrimination can be difficult to separate. For example, is a hijab-wearing woman experiencing discrimination because of her faith or her gender? Is the gay, Latino immigrant experiencing discrimination because he's gay, Latino, or an immigrant?



Where can I learn more?

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1, 139-167.
<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucf>
- Crenshaw, K. (2016). The urgency of intersectionality. TED Talk (video – 18:40).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o&t=182s>
- Crenshaw, K. (2017). TED Talk (video – 5:57).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRci2V8PxW4>
- Hopkins, P. (2018). What is intersectionality? (video – 2:49).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1isIM0ytkE>
- Steinmetz, K. (2020). She coined the term “intersectionality” over 30 years ago. Here’s what it means to her today. *Time* online. February 20, 2020. <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>
- Teaching Tolerance (2016). Intersectionality 101 (video – 3:03).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dni2lyYjE>