

United States

Black feminism & the development of "intersectionality"

In mid-1970s Boston, Massachusetts

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<https://youtu.be/eV3nnFheQRo?t=4m15s>

**Where do political
categories come from?**

**Often: they are forged in
practical experience.**

**So what experience
created "identity
politics"?**

A response to several other kinds of groups:

- White middle-class feminism
 - Black Panthers
- Students for a Democratic Society

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

Identity in combination

We meant to assert that it is legitimate to look at the elements of a combined identity that included affiliation or connection to several marginalized groups in this society. There is meaning in being not solely a person of color, not solely Black, not solely female, not solely lesbian, not solely working class or poor. There is a new constellation of meanings when those identities were combined. (53)

Consciousness

Consciousness means you are doing self-examination and analysis of the circumstances and the situations that you experience and face, and the factors and forces that shape your existence and your political and social status, economic status, too. It really means you're examining and looking at, not just being. (59)

**Is it just about creating
abstract categories?**

**Or about trying to name
things?**

"We matter"

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. (47)

**Why name
yourself,
politically?**

Sometimes people ask me, “Why do you have to say you’re a feminist?” or “Why do you have to say you’re a lesbian?” I try to explain that if I don’t say it, then nobody knows why I have the particular commitment that I do. They won’t know why I view political reality the way I do. I was lots of things before I was a feminist. I was an activist. I certainly was Black before I was a feminist. Feminism is something I claim because I claim it in the name of Black women.

(62)

Smart-Ugly

No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart" had also been considered "ugly," i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives. (49)

**Intersectional
ity has raised
questions**

The threat of infinite divisiveness

The watered-down version of identity politics was just what you described. Which was, “I’m an African American, working-class lesbian with a physical disability and those are the only things I’m concerned about. I’m not really interested in finding out about the struggles of Chicano farm workers to organize labor unions, because that doesn’t have anything to do with me.” (54)

Who's a political actor?

In her introduction to *Sisterhood Is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes: "I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power."

As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us. (52)

"Third World men"

The fact that Third World men could possibly be oppressors as well as oppressed is a very difficult admission, and there have been many open debates and confrontations about it. But we are beginning to understand that you can be an oppressor and oppressed simultaneously, and that it's nothing new. The question is, "What are you going to do about that fact?" (62)

**Oppression was the
keyword**

**But the Combahee River Collective tried to
be down to earth.**

Combahee action, 1979

Why did they die?

ELEVEN

8 ~~7~~ ~~6~~ BLACK WOMEN

Recently ¹¹~~6~~ young Black women have been murdered ^{the} in Roxbury, Dorchester, ~~and~~ ^{the} S. End ^{Bay} ~~and~~ The entire Black community continues to mourn their cruel and brutal deaths. In the face of police indifference and media lies and despite our grief and anger, we have begun to organize ourselves in order to figure out ways to protect ourselves and our sisters, to make the streets safe for women.

We are writing this pamphlet because as Black feminist activists we think it is essential to understand the social and political causes behind these sisters' deaths. We also want to share information about safety measures every woman can take and list groups who are working on the issue of violence against women.

In the Black community the murders have often been talked about as solely racial or racist crimes. It's true that the police and media response has been typically racist. It's true that the victims were all Black and that Black people have always been targets of racist violence in this society, but they were also all women. Our sisters died because they were women just as surely as they died because they were Black. If the murders were

The last idea we want to respond to is that it's men's job to protect women. At first glance this may seem to make sense, but look at the assumptions behind it. Needing to be protected assumes that we are weak, helpless and dependent, that we are victims who need men to protect us from other men. As women in this society we are definitely at risk as far as violence is concerned but WE HAVE TO LEARN TO PROTECT OURSELVES. There are many ways to do this: learning and following common sense safety measures, learning self-defense, setting up phone chains and neighborhood safe-houses, joining and working in groups that are organizing against violence against women are all ways to do this.