

STANDING ON KIMBERLE CRENSHAW'S SHOULDERS: INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE ROAD PAVED FOR US

How One Woman's Vision Transformed Feminism, Making Room for All of Us to Thrive

Imagine trying to navigate a world where each aspect of your identity, be it race, gender, class, is treated differently, making you invisible in the spaces between them. Kimberle Crenshaw recognized this injustice and her concept of intersectionality arose as a radical answer. She defined it as a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking. Membership of multiple interconnected social categories coupled with connected systems and structures of power form structural inequality, which intersectional feminism strives to dismantle.

Ashlee Christoffersen, an academic at the University of Edinburgh gave an example that a person is not, for example, a woman on one hand and disabled on the other, rather, she is the combination of these at the same time, that is, a disabled woman. In this example, her identity as a woman is shaped by her identity as disabled, and vice versa as the elements of identity are not lived or experienced separately.

It is not identity politics on steroids, as some may think. It is basically a lens for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about class inequality as separate from inequality based on gender or sexuality. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these and the experience is not just the sum of its parts. It is simply about how certain aspects of who you are will increase your access to the good things or your exposure to the bad things in life. Like many other social justice ideas, it stands because it resonates with people's lives.

Intersectionality has since become a tool not only for understanding social issues but also for transforming policy, law, and even workplace culture. For example, the Equality and Human Rights Commission have advocated for the concept of intersectionality by developing their own definition which allows them to apply the concept practically to equality and human rights monitoring. They define intersectionality as an analytical tool they use for the purpose of equality and human rights monitoring to show the distinct forms of harm, abuse, discrimination and disadvantage experienced by people when multiple categories of social identity interact with each other.

Crenshaw's framework has helped bring attention to the unique challenges faced by people who live at the intersections of marginalized identities, making space for voices that traditional frameworks often silence. Today's feminist movements, from grassroots organizing to digital advocacy, we owe much to Crenshaw's vision. As we continue to run with her torch, we remember that her work opened doors that made our progress possible. Crenshaw's legacy is woven into every step we take, and her intersectional framework remains a compass for our journey towards equality.

In sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), intersectional feminism has brought attention to the compound barriers disabled women in Africa face in accessing healthcare. Often overlooked in SRHR policies, women with disabilities may encounter stigma, inaccessible facilities, a lack of specialized care that considers both their reproductive and disability-related health needs. Intersectional advocates are pushing for policies that ensure healthcare facilities are equipped with accessible infrastructure and healthcare professionals receive training or inclusive care, so disabled women can access reproductive health services with dignity and without discrimination.

One way to honour her vision is through self-interrogation. It is a good place to start. If you see inequality as a “them” problem, that is an issue. Being able to attend to not just unfair exclusion but also, frankly, unearned inclusion is also part of the equality gambit. All of us have to be open to looking at all of the ways our systems reproduce these inequalities, and that includes the privileges as well as the harms.