

A portrait of Kimberle Crenshaw, a Black woman with long, curly hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark, short-sleeved top and several gold bangles on her right wrist. The background is a solid, dark color.

Intersectionality: The Double Bind of Race and Gender

Kimberle Crenshaw was still in college when she realized that there were no class offerings addressing both race and gender issues. “In the Africana studies program at Cornell,” she says, “the gender aspect of race was woefully underdeveloped. When women were discussed, it was not in political or economic contexts but rather those of literature and poetry. The serious political discourses were framed by men, and women came in at the periphery.”

So Crenshaw delved into this intriguing area of thought. Now a professor of law at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School, she earned a J.D. at Harvard Law School and an LL.M. at the University of Wisconsin Law School. She has published extensively in the areas of civil rights, black feminist legal theory, and race, racism, and the law. She has addressed audiences throughout Europe, Africa, and South America, and her work on race and gender was influential in the drafting of the equality clause in the South African Constitution. In 2001 she authored the background paper on Race and Gender Discrimination for the UN World Conference

on Racism and helped facilitate the inclusion of gender in the WCAR Conference Declaration.

In the domestic arena, Crenshaw has served as a member of the National Science Foundation's committee to research violence against women and assisted the legal team representing Anita Hill in the Clarence Thomas hearings. In 1996, she co-founded the African-American Policy Forum to highlight the centrality of gender in racial justice discourse. She was twice named Professor of the Year at UCLA Law School and received the Lucy Terry Prince Unsung Heroine Award, presented by the Lawyers Committee on Civil Rights Under Law, for her groundbreaking work on black women and the law.

Perspectives editorial board member Sheila Thomas spoke to Crenshaw in March.

Intersectionality of Race and Gender

Perspectives: Tell me about the origins of your concept of intersectionality.

Crenshaw: It grew out of trying to conceptualize the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you're standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, "Well, we can't figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination. And unless they can show us which one it was, we can't help them."

Perspectives: And this is how the law treats the problem?

Crenshaw: It seemed to me to capture the initial reluctance of courts to credit the claims of women of color when they were seeking remedies for race and gender discrimination. If the injuries were simultaneously produced, the law, it seemed, was confounded.

Perspectives: Have there been times when you were personally discriminated against?

Crenshaw: I have a story I tell a lot. A member of our study group at Harvard was the first African-American member of a previously exclusive white club. He invited the rest of the group—me and another African-American man—to visit him at this club. When we knocked on the door, he opened it, stepped outside, and shut it quickly. He said that he was embarrassed because he had forgotten to tell us something about entering the building. My male friend immediately bristled, saying that if black people couldn't go through the front door, we weren't coming in at all. But our friend said, "No, no, no, that's not it—but women have to go through the back door." And my friend was totally okay with that.

Perspectives: How did that affect you?

Crenshaw: I understood that we can all stand together as long as we think that we are all equally affected by a particular discrimination, but the moment where a different barrier affects a subset of us, our solidarity often falls apart. I began to look at all the other ways that not only the race and civil rights agenda but the gender agenda are sometimes uninformed by and inattentive to the ways that subgroups experience discrimination.

There are institutional elisions as well. For example, at Harvard, when we were struggling to get the law school to interview and perhaps hire women and people of color, the school responded with two committees. One was a gender committee that studied women candidates; the other was a committee that studied candidates of color. Not too surprisingly, women of color seemed to fall through the cracks.

Perspectives: Would you call that discrimination?

Crenshaw: Traditional thinking might say, "Oh, well, they are intentionally discriminating against women of color." But the reality was that nobody really thought about women of color. In thinking about discrimination against women and people of color, women of color are frequently lost. Some of the very early cases where African-American women challenged employment policies of major industries were quite eye-opening because they showed that gender- and race-segregated industries had jobs that are deemed appropriate for blacks and jobs that are appropriate for women, but virtually none available for blacks who were women, or women who were black.

Perspectives: So where African-American men were on the line in the factory, there were no jobs for women because of gender discrimination, and where women were placed in the secretarial pool or front office, only white women were seen as appropriate as secretaries or personal assistants.

Crenshaw: Exactly. So African-American women said, "Hey, we are being discriminated against on the

basis of both race and gender.” They wanted to argue compound discrimination. Initially, though, it confounded the court. In *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, where black women’s claims of race and gender discrimination in hiring were rejected, the court thought that if it gave these women leave to make this claim, they were going to be giving them a super remedy, something more than everybody else receives.

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