



Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later

Professor Crenshaw coined the term and co-founded the African American Policy Forum. Before AAPF's 20th anniversary, Crenshaw reflects on where intersectionality is heading.

Twenty-eight years ago, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in a paper as a way to help explain the oppression of African-American women. Crenshaw’s then somewhat academic term is now at the forefront of national conversations about racial justice, identity politics, and policing—and over the years has helped shape legal discussions. A leading thinker and scholar in the field of critical race theory, Crenshaw, a professor at Columbia Law School, directs the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies and is a co-founder of the African American Policy Forum, a think tank, both based on campus.

On June 10, AAPF celebrates its 20th anniversary with a gala honoring U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, MSNBC journalist Joy-Ann Reid, performance artist Eve Ensler, and scholar Barbara Smith. A few days before the event, Crenshaw spoke about where she sees intersectionality research heading and her ongoing work as a scholar and advocate.

This interview was lightly edited for clarity and space.

Q: You originally coined the term intersectionality to describe bias and violence against black women, but it's become more widely used—for LGBTQ issues, among others. Is that a misunderstanding of intersectionality?

Crenshaw: Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.

Some people look to intersectionality as a grand theory of everything, but that's not my intention. If someone is trying to think about how to explain to the courts why they should not dismiss a case made by black women, just because the employer did hire blacks who were men and women who were white, well, that's what the tool was designed to do. If it works, great. If it doesn't work, it's not like you have to use this concept.

The other issue is that intersectionality can get used as a blanket term to mean, "Well, it's complicated." Sometimes, "It's complicated" is an excuse not to do anything. At AAPF and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, we want to move beyond that idea.

We try to take ideas and make them into hands-on tools that advocates and communities can use. Part of it is public education. We use art and other projects to show how people are experiencing intersectional harms, such as mothers of women killed by the police, or young girls expelled from school. We work directly with advocates and communities to develop ways they can better see these problems and better intervene in advocacy.

You've said there is an "intersectional erasure" in the Trump era. Can you explain?

What's most problematic about the contemporary conversation is the complete irrelevance of women of color. People talk about how constituencies, specifically working class white men, saw a terrible deterioration of their prospects and they were angry and wanted to vote for someone not part of the establishment.

If you look at women of color, especially blacks and Latinas, their economic well-being has been most impacted by deindustrialization, and by the de-funding of the public sector. So if any group had a reason to respond to scapegoat politics, you would think it might be those workers who were subject to both racialized downward pressures and gendered downward pressures. Yet they were least likely to vote for someone not of the establishment.

Why aren't we talking about that? Why is the intersection of maleness and whiteness driving our analysis and not the intersection of being a woman and a person of color? What is going on that these women of color did not respond to xenophobia and racism? What did they have that made them say we're better than this and we want more for our country?

One of AAPF's initiatives is #SayHerName, which shines a light on black women who have been subjected to police violence. What has the movement's impact been?

The impact can be measured first by noting how infrequently any woman was mentioned as a victim of police violence just two years ago, and now we hear often about “men and women” killed by police, or “African-Americans” rather than “African-American men.” Sandra Bland is the most often mentioned, and many people know the name, Rekia Boyd. But too few know Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hal, or India Kager. The sense that this itself is a problem is a new recognition, one that activists, elected officials, and even families are beginning to give voice to.

But the most significant shift has been in the consciousness of mothers who have lost daughters to police violence. We’ve brought them together several times. They have said that their determination and ability to fight has been grounded on their awareness that they are not alone; that there are other mothers who are also struggling in obscurity; that they are a sorority that no one would want to join; and that now that they have found each other, they can receive and provide support, and even permission to find joy in life after such an unspeakable loss.

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Posted on June 8, 2017

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Published

June 08, 2017
