

# Intersectionality as an emerging discipline in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Women Studies

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## ABSTRACT

The Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement in the 1960's America fought for their basic rights and eventually were successful in achieving them. These two movements promised a new beginning for African-American men and White American women, but ironically these movements were relegating an equally important issue and that was of Black American women. Both the Civil Right and Feminist activists did not fulfill their promise to help Black women of America to come out of their century's old bondage of multi-dimensional oppression. It was high time for black women activists, writers and intellectuals to raise their voice against the injustice they faced in their own homes where they confronted domestic violence in the hands of male family members and in the homes of their white masters and landladies where these black women worked as maids or nannies. Black feminists argued that feminism which was in vogue at the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has always been Euro-centric in its approach; they didn't see a promising future for themselves even when Civil rights movement was successful. For them, it was male dominated movement, sexist and misogynist in its approach. Also, feminism was not giving enough space to black women as it always carried white supremacy at its core. Black women were left out in protest and rallies which were organized by white middle class American women because of the racist attitude.

Black women of America started their own campaign against the oppression they faced in the society to make their voices heard and their identities recognized. In this paper, I have tried to present the core issues of Intersectionality (study of multiple oppressions), its inclusive nature, its difference from traditional feminism and the major arguments of Intersectional theorists who have tried to use Intersectionality as a new research paradigm in women studies.

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## KEYWORDS

Intersectionality, African-American women studies, multi-dimensional oppression, Black Feminism.

## INTRODUCTION

The term *Intersectionality* was first coined by Crenshaw, a Black legal theorist in her essay *Demarginalizing the intersection of Race and Sex* (Crenshaw, 1989) on the subject of multi-dimensional oppression of African-American woman in society. She explained the term in another of her paper *Mapping the margins* (Crenshaw, 1994) on the same subject. She defined the concept of intersectional feminism as a kind of approach which analyzes the oppression of women of color by taking into consideration all aspects of their identity which include race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, nationality, disability, marital and immigration status and other dimensions as well which determine her identity. This approach is different from the feminist approach because it does not view gender as the main cause of oppression and feminism is a gender centric theory. Similarly, this theory is also different from Marxist-Feminism which takes into consideration the issue of class and gender struggle faced by women. Intersectionality is gaining recognition in academic circles especially in American universities from the last three decades because it talks about the women of all sections of society who have no space in the white feminist discourse. This theory is as complex as the identity of women. The advocates of this theory (Crenshaw, 1990, 1994) argue that we cannot understand oppression and its depth only by taking single issue struggle into consideration but we have to look into each and every aspect of the discriminations which the women face in their everyday lives because of many reasons be it race, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, age, marital status, disability, immigration status and much more. It is true that gender has been the main reason of oppression against the women around the world from ages, but it is not the only reason which should be taken into consideration while analyzing the status of women and the injustice done by society on her. The intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1990) is multi-dimensional and inclusive in its approach. In 21<sup>st</sup> Century, when everyone is debating about women empowerment, there are many complex issues of women which are not discussed because, by giving gender related issues more importance, the other equally important issues were never discussed. This becomes the reason for the women around the world, who are still lagging behind men in every aspect of society. The argument which the black feminists made was that black men secured their civil liberties and the feminists were successful in gaining universal suffrage in 1960's but the white American women belonging to other ethnic groups were denied those rights. American feminists kept their interests at the forefront and remain ignorant about the demands of sisters of other ethnic groups (Collins, 1990).

Intersectional feminism is a new form of approach which if applied in various disciplines like sociology, psychology, law, literature and gender studies will develop the way of looking and understanding the oppression that women faces at different levels in social hierarchy (Crenshaw, 1989). It will help the researchers to understand the level of oppression and after the analysis of its complexities, theorists will come up with different solutions that will help women all around the world to come up on the same front and demand for equality in each and every sphere in personal and public spaces. In the early stages of development, this theory was nameless, and it was described in different phrases by Black feminist theorists (Lorde, 1989 & Davis, 1981) who were alienated by the Eurocentric feminism. They thought that feminism as an active movement was not promoting the issues of women belonging to other ethnic groups and nationalities. Feminism was only promoting issues of white women of Europe and America. The black feminists had to face the racial segregation in the hands of white feminists. The women suffrage did not help them to gain a respectful place in the American society. The black feminist felt that feminism, as a movement, was not sufficient for them to raise their issues as their struggle involved other issues like race, ethnicity, past history as well. This was necessary to bring something satisfying that will help the women of color to come out of the deplorable conditions and help them to raise their voice against the society which gave privilege to the elite and middle-class white men and women.

So, Intersectionality passed through different stages with different terminologies, some theorist used the phrase “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990), or “interlocking system of oppression” (Collective, 1983) or “double and multiple jeopardy” (King, 1988) to describe this approach.

### **OVERVIEW OF INTERSECTIONAL DISCOURSE**

Collins (1990) explains in her book that Intersectionality “reminds us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p. 18). This statement explains that if we give more privilege to a single-issue struggle and keep ignoring the other causes of oppression then we will fail to understand the exact experiences of a particular group or individual. So, to make the complexities of an identity easily comprehensible it is very much necessary to know the different reasons for oppression, and study them simultaneously and not in isolation. The pedestals of Feminism (De Beauvoir, 1949 and Friedan, 1963) and Marxism (Marx and Engels) analyze a single issue related to gender, class respectively and do not analyze any other form of oppression. This type of study is favorable for people dealing with single cause of oppression but people

like the African-American females whose identities are multi-dimensional were left hopeless when both the Civil Rights movement (early 1960's) and Feminist movement (1960's decade) did not help them in any way. The black men leading the Civil Rights movement strived for their rights keeping the issues of their women folk at the backstage. In the same way Feminist movement (1960's) strived for female rights only and never accepted black women as part of the whole process. In the large rallies and meetings where the white feminists gathered to give voice to their struggles, they kept the black females in separate spaces and never allowed them to speak revealing their racial bent of mind. The black females realized the sexist nature of the black men and the racist attitude of white American females which would never allow the emancipation of women of color. A black feminist and lesbian organization, *The Combahee River Collective* published a manifesto *The Black Feminist Statement* (1974) which discusses the concept of "simultaneity" present in the identity of black American women. They explained it as the simultaneous factors of race, class, gender and sexuality which influence the individuals with these multiple aspects of identity and the oppression they face due to these multiple factors. So, the argument in the manifesto is challenging the theories which analyze the black female experience in the male and gender centric movements. It also questions the application of feminist and racist theory to the lives and experiences of women of color. The activism by colored women questions the White female centric activism about their absence in the feminist movement. They argue that the white American feminists were struggling to gain a position in a system, they wanted to be the part of a powerful system which was racist and sexist to its core. They were lending support to that system rather than dismantling it. The women of color from America felt alienated by the feminist movement which was growing fast across both sides of the Atlantic.

Sojourner Truth, the black woman abolitionist and women right activist became the first black woman born out of slavery who gave a speech at a feminist gathering during the Civil Rights movement. Her speech "Ain't I a woman?" (Truth, 1851) became the first speech ever given by a black woman in a convention where white women were present as audience. Her speech also focused on the equal rights for all women as well as for blacks. According to Hooks (1981):

[w]hen women suffrage failed to alter in anyway the social status of black women, many black female suffragists became disillusioned with women's rights. they had supported women suffrage only to find their interests betrayed, only to find that "women suffrage" would be used as a weapon to strengthen white oppression of black people...while white women's rights advocates struggled in 1933 to get the Senate to pass the Equal Rights

Amendment , black women activists were fighting to prevent the lynching of black women and men by mobs of white racists, to improve the conditions of masses of poverty-stricken black people, and to provide educational opportunities (p. 172).

Similarly, Cooper, A.J, a black liberation activist also questioned the marginalization and alienation of black women from the feminist discourse. She was one of the first black women to earn a doctorate degree in 1924. She also advocated for an approach which would be different from the traditional feminism as it did not help the women of marginalized sections of society to improve their working and living conditions.

### **INTERSECTIONAL THEORY: A RESEARCH PARADIGM IN GENDER STUDIES**

Many writers were writing about intersectionality before the term was coined by Crenshaw in 1989. A collection of articles on multiple oppressions of black American women from 1830's to the present times (Sheftall, 1995) says that "black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their dual race and gender identity and their limited access to economic resources". Another article also uses the intersectional lens to analyze the intersections of various kinds of injustices faced by women of color at a given point of time, saying "Black women have long recognized the special circumstances of our lives in the United States: the commonalities that we share with all women, as well as the bonds that connect us to the men of our race" (King, 1988). It is time and again argued that the experience of oppression faced by women of color is way more traumatic and different from the oppression which the white women face because of being a female. The woman of color is not exploited just because of her gender but because she belongs to other race, she has no source of income, she belongs to the lowest strata of the social hierarchy, has a history of slavery with her and many more taboos. So the need for intersectional theory was necessary so that the issues which were unheard of could be addressed under one theoretical paradigm.

A cultural theorist and feminist, (Anzaldua, 1987) describes a state of being beyond the binary in her works, the idea of awareness in an individual of his/her conflicting and meshing identities and using these "new angles of vision" to confront and question the binary thinking western world and their theories. It also means a "new higher consciousness" that will break down barriers and fight against the male/female dualistic norms of gender. The "borderlands" that she refers to in her writing are both geographical as well as reference to mixed race, heritages, religions, sexualities, and languages. Her focus is mainly in juxtaposing the conflicting and intersecting identities.

The Standpoint epistemology (Collins, 1990) gives the similar concept of intersectionality where the specific perspective of an individual matters the most. It focuses on the specific geographic and social location of an individual where from his/her knowledge becomes unique and subjective as it varies from person to person. The term “outsider within” is also used to describe the way the colored women think and get attention from the people who marginalize them. Collins also focuses on “how African American male and female youth’s experience with social issues of education, unemployment, popular culture and political activism articulate with global phenomena, specifically, complex social inequalities, global capitalist development, trans-nationalism, and political activism” (Collins, 1990). She says, “oppression because of race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality are intersecting, mutually constructing systems of power” (Collins, 1990). She utilizes the term “Intersectionality”, coined by Crenshaw, to refer to this simultaneous overlapping of multiple forms of oppression. Black women have unique histories at the intersection of systems of power they have created world views out of a need for self-definition and to work on behalf of social justice. Black women’s specific experiences with intersecting systems of oppression provide a window into these same processes for other individuals and social groups.

Similarly, “women in lower class and poor groups are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status” (Hooks, 1981, p. 238). A more inclusive theory and platform is needed so that long-standing idea of sisterhood needs to be used in practice. She challenged the feminists to consider gender’s relation to race, class and sex, a concept which came to be known as intersectionality, which will adhere to the promise of uplifting women of each and every community rather any specific group.

So looking back at the historical background of the emergence of Intersectionality it can be said that it started from the time when black women were disillusioned from the feminist and civil rights movement, but its echoes back from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America when black women activists were not satisfied with the living conditions of women of color. This feeling of isolation in a Black feminist anthology chronicles the experience of the author who felt betrayed by the men of their own community, she writes “It took me three years to fully understand that ...the countless speeches that all began ‘the Black man...’did not include me” (Wallace, 1982, p. 19). Intersectionality as a concept was thought and discussed in early writing of black women but finally got its place in academic circles very recently in 1989 when Crenshaw (1989) used this term in her research article. Since then this term is gaining

more and more recognition in the academic disciplines not only in American black studies but all over the world.

## **CONCLUSION**

When we think about the diversity of women around the world, we come across so many issues which the women face in every country. Feminism promises to bring emancipation of women around the world, but it failed to do so in case of Black American women. When we look at the larger picture, we see the women from different countries irrespective of their religion, ethnicity, age and many factors face discrimination. Intersectionality as an approach to address every injustice equally is more promising and satisfying than feminism. The need of intersectional analysis and practice is necessary in today's multi-cultural world, so that the problems of diverse groups of women can come to the forefront and world will acknowledge their struggle. If intersectional way of looking at oppression will be applied to situations faced by women of color, the society will easily comprehend the basic reasons of injustice faced by women of different communities. Intersectional lens analyzes the different dynamics of power and how the multiple oppressions come to intersect each other forming a complex web of oppressions which the women have to resist in their everyday lives. It was the struggle of black women of America which led to the formation of this theory, but its inclusive nature has opened doors to the women of different countries to use this pedestal and make their voices heard. Intersectionality does not relegate one issue for the sake of the other equally important issue. It examines every kind of oppression in equal terms and helps us to realize that we "do not live a single-issue life" (Lorde, 1982) and our struggles are not because of a single issue. Oppressions in today's world is multi-faceted which may include race, caste, class, gender, disability, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, past history and much more can be added to this because Intersectionality is an all-inclusive term, a theory of multi-dimensional oppression.

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