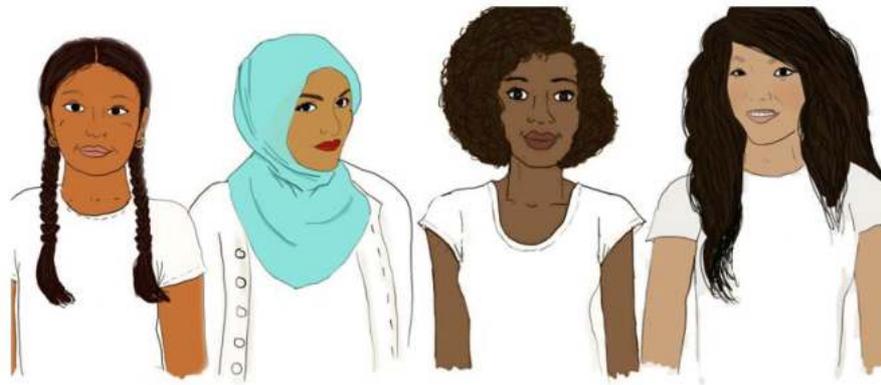


What intersectionality isn't



[Image credit: radicalwomen.org].

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If you've been paying attention to recent mainstream feminist activism, you'd be forgiven for thinking that feminism is a movement for everyone, everywhere. The mistake that leads to this position is actually kind of interesting. It comes from a misunderstanding of the idea of 'intersectionality'. "If your feminism isn't intersectional, it's bullshit" is a popular feminist slogan. I recently got so annoyed with a poster featuring that slogan, in the bathroom at a university where I was on sabbatical, that I graffitied it to say "If your feminism *involves telling other women how to do feminism*, it's bullshit". But I was still annoyed about it a week later, so I tore it down. #sorrynotsorry.

The idea of intersectionality comes from Kimberlé Crenshaw, in a paper from 1989. Crenshaw has a [TED talk](#)[1] about the concept, which ends with a really moving #sayhername exercise. *Watch it, go on.* I'm going to explain here what Crenshaw does (and doesn't) say in her paper, so I can then explain the mistake that so many people are making in how they understand intersectionality and how they (mis)use it to get from feminism as a coherent movement in defence of the rights and interests of female people, to an incoherent movement that for some weird reason is called "feminism" and yet has nothing in particular to do with the rights or interests of female people. Or even feminine people. Or anything that would be worthy of the name.

Crenshaw begins her paper by noting that people tend to treat race and gender (by which she means sex) as separate categories. There are black people, and their oppression can be theorised about in a certain way; and there are female people (I'll use 'female' and 'woman' synonymously here), and their oppression can be theorised about in a certain way, too. When we theorise about these categories, we tend to focus on people who are *only* oppressed by this feature. So when we think about black people's oppression we tend to think in terms of black men, and when we think about women's oppression we tend to think in terms of white women. (Crenshaw makes this point vividly in the opening exercise of her TED talk, where she has the audience stand up, and then sit down when they hear a name they don't recognize. Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddy Gray? Yes. Michelle Cusseaux, Tanisha Anderson, Aura Rosser, Meagan Hockaday? No. Many have heard of the black men, and few have heard of the black women, killed by police violence in the US.)

In the paper, Crenshaw discusses three legal cases. In one, a group of black women argued that black women were disadvantaged within General Motors (GM), the company they all worked for. GM turned out to have not hired black women until 1964, and to have laid off all those hired after 1970. But the court denied that black women were "a special class to be protected from discrimination". They were

reluctant to “creat[e...] new classes of protected minorities... by combination”. They explicitly said that there was provision in the law for race-based discrimination, or sex-based discrimination, but not both together. Because GM had hired women (albeit white women), there was no case for sex-based discrimination, and because they’d hired black people (albeit black men), there was no case for race-based discrimination.

In another case, a group of employees argued that their employer, Hughes Helicopter, discriminated on the grounds of sex. The representative of the group of women was a black woman. But the court refused to certify her, saying that she had claimed to be discriminated against as a black woman, not (only) a woman. This, they said, meant there were “serious doubts as to [her] ability to adequately represent white female employees”. Here, the difficulty runs the other way. The representative was a black woman; black women are women (*obviously*); so the representative could certainly represent the group of women. But the fact of her membership in both groups meant she was seen as a kind of ‘hybrid’ case. Perhaps her discrimination was due to her race, and not her sex, the court might have speculated.

In a third case, a court accepted two black women as representatives in a race-based discrimination case, but refused to let them represent black employees more generally, and only accepted them as representing black women. This was on the grounds that sex-based differences between black men and black women could be expected to make an important difference to the company’s discrimination (or lack of it).

It is in discussing these three cases, and the ways that black women are treated under anti-discrimination law, that Crenshaw gives the metaphor of the intersection. Here it is in her own words:

“Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination”.

This is a really useful idea. The class of women is made up of a little over half the population of the world. There are literally all sorts of women. Some of these will be oppressed in no other way than their womanhood (they will be rich and white) and disadvantaged in no other way than their womanhood (they will be straight and able-bodied and the advantaged side of whatever else you’d like to throw into the mix). Some of those will be oppressed in one, or two other ways; disadvantaged in one, or two, or three (etc.) other ways. They’re all women, but those who are oppressed or disadvantaged in no other way than their womanhood are like people standing on a long straight one-way street. If they get hit, we know where the car was coming from. Those who are oppressed or disadvantaged in multiple ways are in intersections that are the hub of increasingly many streets. If they get hit, it could be from any number of directions, either one at a time or all at once.

What this metaphor *does* say is that women have all sorts of intersecting identities and we need to take them seriously, in thinking about anti-discrimination law more narrowly, but also in thinking about feminism and how we can protect the rights and interests of women more generally. What it *does not* say is that *people* (read: all the non-women, too) have all sorts of intersecting identities, and we need to take them seriously.

How is it that people tend to slip from Crenshaw’s claim that intersectionality matters, to the claim that feminism is for everybody, then?

It goes like this: feminism is a movement in defence of the rights and interests of women. Black women are oppressed both in virtue of being women, and in virtue of being black. If we’re going to protect women’s rights and interests, then we have to fight against the oppression of black *people*. After all, if we

only fight against the oppression of women, black women will only end up a little better off – they’ll still suffer under all the oppression that is tied to their being black. (I’m assuming for simplicity that we can ‘separate’ oppressions, which I actually think is true, but would need a longer argument and some empirical research. Crenshaw is ambiguous on this point, because the intersections metaphor suggests separation, but she says at one point that the struggles against racism and sexism may be indistinguishable). But an incidental part of fighting against the oppression of black *people* is fighting against the oppression of black *men*. So suddenly, men are a part of the goals of the feminist movement.

Now run that whole story again, and again, for poor women, lesbians, non-able-bodied women, neuro-atypical women, trans men, nonbinary females, and so on. Suddenly in order to help women we have to help everyone. If we’re going to help lesbians then we’ll need to support LGB rights (which includes bisexual and gay men); if we’re going to help poor women then we’ll need to support more generous social welfare payments, or basic income, or a higher threshold on tax-free income (which will help poor men); and so on. Feminism has stopped being a movement for female people, and started being a movement for everyone, everywhere, with the vague justification that we can’t help female people without accidentally helping a lot of male people along the way.

Where all this gets really pernicious, of course, is when you run it together with the *oppression olympics*, which is an unkind name for the current trend of minority groups desperately trying to prove that they’re the very worst off – which trans activists seem to be into with gusto. This has two implications. First, some people make the political choice to endorse the doctrine *trans women are women* (others, perhaps, don’t quite endorse it, but would rather avoid the sanctioning of being a known dissenter (“TERF”! they yell. “Transphobe!” “Bigot!”). If you think that trans women are women, then of course, being trans is one further source of disadvantage for women that can turn your street into an intersection. (Although note that there looks to be some gaming of the system here: before the trans woman was trans, he was male, so at least if he was rich and white and straight, then he wasn’t even standing on a street. He was in some kind of fluffy cloud paradise, never getting hit at all (or at least, not by vehicles). Plausibly, his being trans merely puts him onto a street; it’s strange to think that he’s suddenly at an intersection, because his being trans *also* makes him a woman, and even stranger to think it also makes him a lesbian. *Yes, some people really claim that males can be lesbians*).

If we accept that trans women are women, then a group of male people – formerly understood as the oppressors of female people – may well end up having *priority* within the feminist movement. Consider a black trans woman. He can claim oppression in virtue of his race and his sex. (This is a little complicated, because he’s actually not oppressed in virtue of his sex, which is male; but if he passes as female he’ll be oppressed in virtue of his *apparent* sex, and in any case, many trans women insist that they are female and so will claim that they face this oppression, even if they don’t. If you don’t believe me, look up ‘transmisogyny’, which is the incoherent idea that someone can be simultaneously subject to both misogyny and transphobia. Newsflash! If you’re being clocked as a trans woman then you’re probably not subject to misogyny, and if you’re subject to misogyny then you’re probably not subject to transphobia. You can’t have your cake and eat it too, guys). And he can claim disadvantage in virtue of his being trans. Some of the group understood to be the oppressor of female people have somehow now become *the worst off within the class of female people*, and potential recipients not only of incidental benefits of feminist activism, but of *centering* within the feminist movement.

But there’s a similarly worrying implication even if we reject the claim that trans women are women, given the slip from intersecting identities of women to overlapping identities of people. If trans people are really the worst off social group, as they claim to be, they’ll still have a good case for being a focus of feminist support and campaigning, on the view that being trans is something that seriously disadvantages some women (trans men). This will have incidental benefits for the much more visible and vocal sector of the trans community, namely trans women. (There are separate, and interesting, questions to ask about this background assumption that we should always give priority to the worst-off, which is a philosophical doctrine known as ‘prioritarianism’, but that’s for another time).

To finish, there's an interesting philosophical question to ask, about feminism as a movement. Perhaps it really should be about helping all women, and that means helping women *even in respects of their lives that have nothing to do with their sex*. But note that we're not forced into that position. Another way to think about feminism is as a movement concerned with helping women when it comes to their sex-based rights and interests. That gets us closer to the 'core issues' more familiar to the history of feminism, like women's enfranchisement, and women's education, and abortion rights, and control over reproduction, and equal opportunity to employment and remuneration, and freedom from domestic violence and sexual assault and street harassment and all the other things that women suffer when they live under patriarchy, as we unfortunately do. We can do all of this while paying attention to the sex-based aspects of intersecting identities (while disregarding the aspects not relating to sex).

I'm in favour of thinking about feminism in this latter way, because then feminism isn't suddenly and ridiculously also about *smashing capitalism* and *fighting climate change*. These things might have sex-based aspects, and where they do, feminism should be concerned with them. But where they don't, we should be okay with a division of labour. Let the anarchists fight capitalism, let the environmentalists fight climate change, and let's all be good allies if and where we have the energy and the resources (some issues bundle together more naturally, too).

So: "if your feminism isn't intersectional, it's bullshit". Is that true? Well, if it means, "if your feminism is for people who are only oppressed/disadvantaged in virtue of their womanhood, then it's bullshit", then damn straight it's true. Feminism is not only for rich white straight able-bodied blah blah blah ladies. But if it means, "if your feminism isn't for men, it's bullshit", or "if your feminism isn't also fighting capitalism, it's bullshit", or even, as one notorious recent tweet by *the freakin' United Nations* had it, if your definition of feminist isn't "a person who believes in & stands up for the political, economic, and social equality of all human beings" (did you catch that? Not women – *all human beings*), it's bullshit, then no, no it's not true.

Links:

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o&feature=youtu.be>