Intersectionality – concept, debate, and praxis

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Abstract

This paper investigates the conceptual framework of intersectionality to assert its essential application across diverse fields, including scholarship, governmental strategy, and advocacy. Rooted in Black feminist thought, this model provides a crucial analytic strategy for critical praxis. It operates by analysing how social categories (such as race, gender, and class) combine to generate unique configurations of both privilege and subjugation.

By moving beyond single-axis analyses, intersectionality highlights the interconnected nature of social inequalities, ensuring that interventions are targeted at those who are multiply burdened at the nexus of various disadvantages. Ultimately, this approach is crucial for developing equitable and transformative strategies that focus on achieving social justice. However, the concept's necessary adaptability means it remains an "analysis-in-progress"[1] that is, quoting Patricia Hill Collins, "always under construction"[2].

Introduction

In this essay, I aim to interrogate the concept of intersectionality and argue that an intersectional approach is useful, even needed, in many areas, such as (academic) research, developing policies, and activism, because it provides an understanding of how multiple, overlapping systems of oppression (like racism and sexism) create unique experiences of disadvantage for individuals, which create opportunities to develop effective and inclusive strategies for social justice.

By examining how social categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability interact, rather than considering them in isolation, intersectionality reveals the complex and interdependent nature of inequality, allowing for the development of more comprehensive solutions that address diverse lived experiences.

In **Section 1**, I will begin with a definition of the concept of intersectionality and provide a brief history of its emergence and its place within a broader context of Black feminist thought in the US. My starting points will be the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, both key feminist scholars for the past 40 years.

Thereafter, in **Section 2**, I will outline some of the discussions in academia surrounding the concept of intersectionality and aim to do justice to the salient points in this debate. The academic literature on intersectionality is vast and almost never-ending, and my ambition is to provide a brief overview of the key milestones of the concept's trajectory and development since its inception.

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[1] K. Crenshaw, D.W. Carbado, V. M. Mays, B. Tomlinson. "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." (2013) Columbia Law School Scholarship Archive, p.2 https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3783&context=faculty_scholarship (accessed 2025-12-01)

[2] P. Hill Collins, 10. Intersectionality and Epistemic Injustice, The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice (2019), Kindle edition, p.115

In **Section 3**, I will examine discussions that have taken place outside academia, as they seem to have influenced interpretations of the travelling concept.

In **Section 4**, I will then demonstrate how intersectionality approaches are being applied in various fields, including activism, social justice, healthcare, and law, as well as some of the challenges these efforts have encountered.

1: Definition and background

Originating in legal and feminist theory, intersectionality now influences diverse fields all over the world, including social work, public policy, education, healthcare, business, community organising, legal studies, and global efforts to combat poverty and inequality, leading to a more nuanced, inclusive, and effective approach to addressing social injustices.

Intersectionality is a conceptual framework for understanding how social categories (like race, gender, class, etc.) combine to create unique systems of both oppression and privilege. It highlights that these systems are interconnected and cannot be analysed in isolation. Merriam-Webster defines intersectionality as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized[3] individuals or groups."[4] For example, a Black woman may experience discrimination differently from a White woman or a Black man due to the intersection of race and gender.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and a scholar of Critical Race Theory, introduced the concept of intersectionality in her influential 1989 article, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*[5]. Crenshaw argued that Black women are often erased in theory because both antidiscrimination law and political movements (feminism and antiracism) employed a "single-axis framework" that treats race and gender as mutually exclusive categories. Using the metaphor of a traffic interchange where different roads intersect, Crenshaw illustrated this single-axis legal failure through analysis of several court cases, such as DeGraffenreid v General Motors, where courts refused to recognise compound discrimination claims brought by Black women. Furthermore, Crenshaw's critique extended to feminist theory and Black liberation politics, asserting that both movements marginalise Black women by basing their central principles on the experiences of more privileged group members, such as white women or Black men. The central argument is that effective social justice requires shifting the focus to those who are multiply burdened at the intersection of various disadvantages.

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[3] I prefer not to use the term marginalised groups, since the world's so-called marginalised groups are the majority (all women, people with disabilities, people of colour, LGBTQ+ folks, Indigenous peoples, people of a lower socio-economic status, etc.) The word marginalised has a connotation of existing in the margins of society, of being relegated to an unimportant or powerless position, so I choose not to use this word and rather use 'historically disempowered and oppressed'. Being a woman, I am not marginalised as in unimportant or powerless, but I have been historically disempowered and oppressed.

[4] Merriam-Webster https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intersectionality (accessed 2025-08-18)

[5] K. Crenshaw (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989, Article 8. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/ (accessed 2025-12-02)

One year later, in 1990, Patricia Hill Collins' groundbreaking book, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*[6], was first published. Her book is an extensive overview of Black feminist intellectual traditions. The core subject is the social construction of Black feminist thought, which Hill Collins explores by centring Black women's experiences and ideas and rejecting traditional Eurocentric frameworks. Hill Collins illuminates the unique standpoint of African American women, integrating theory with feminist practice, and challenges the dominance of white feminist perspectives in feminist theory. The framework of intersectionality (or intersectional paradigms) is central to analysing Black women's experiences and is used throughout the volume. Hill Collins defends the use of intersectionality as a core paradigm for Black feminist thought primarily because it accurately captures the complexity of oppression in Black women's lives and provides the necessary framework for achieving empowerment and social justice.

In 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw published another important article, Mapping the Margins[7], where she continues to examine how women of colour experience violence and marginalisation differently due to the overlapping systems of racism and sexism.

Now, 35 years later, the concept of intersectionality has evolved and travelled in and out of academia, from the US to other continents, and has been influenced and interpreted by many, both within and outside the academic world. One of the questions that can be asked is whether the original iteration of the concept is the (only) true one, or if we should allow for and recognise an evolving concept within limits.

Before we proceed, it is essential to be aware of the intersectionality's place within the broader context of Black feminist thought in the US. As Patricia Hill Collins outlines in her 2015 article, Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas, intersectionality is a knowledge project, an analytical strategy, and a form of critical praxis for social justice, noting that despite its consensus on complexity, its "precise boundaries remain fluid".[8]

Intersectionality's core ideas emerged from a "broader array of cross-cultural, cross-national, and historically specific social justice projects that aimed to dismantle multiple social inequalities".[9] US Black feminism in the 1960s and 1970s served as a visible location for the emergence of a race/class/gender approach and its subsequent incorporation into the academy. A defining moment was the 1982 circulation of "The Combahee River Collective Statement".[10] This document explicitly argued that "we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking".[11]

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[6] P. Hill Collins, Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. Second ed. Routledge, (2009). First published in 1990 (Hyman)

[7] K. Crenshaw, Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, and Violence Against Women of Color. Stanford Law Review. 1991; 43(6):1241– 1300. https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/files/2020/02/1229039.pdf (accessed 2025-10-10)

[8] P. Hill Collins, article, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas" (2015), the Prefatory Chapter in Volume 41 of the *Annual Review of Sociology*. P.3 https://edspace.american.edu/culturallysustainingclassrooms/wp-content/uploads/sites/1030/2017/09/annurev-soc-073014-112142.pdf

[9] Ibid. p.8

[10] The Combahee River Collective, The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) Black Past URL: https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/ (accessed 2025-10-09)

[11] Ibid. Introduction (accessed 2025-10-09)

One iconic figure in the history of US Black Feminist Thought is Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), a leader in the abolitionist and women's rights movements. One of her significant contributions was the delivery of her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, which challenged the marginalisation of Black women and highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender, long before the concept had an official name.[12]

Important are also Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, who, in their 1983 article, "Contextualizing Feminism — Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions,"[13] explored how gender, ethnicity, and class divisions intersect and shape women's experiences and social positions. In this article, they acknowledge that: "The need for the study of the intersection of these divisions has been recognized recently by black feminists."[14] This work, published in London, was instrumental in developing the concept of intersectionality before being named by Crenshaw. They argue that these divisions cannot be understood in isolation but must be analysed together within specific social and historical contexts to understand women's diverse struggles and forms of oppression.[15]

After the concept of intersectionality was named in 1989, two more recent events have played a role in the travels and development of intersectionality. They are the 2001 UN conference in Durban, South Africa, known as the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (WCAR), and the 2009 conference in Frankfurt, which celebrated the 20th anniversary of the naming of intersectionality, titled "Celebrating Intersectionality?" *Debates on a Multi-faceted Concept in Gender Studies*.

The 2001 WCAR conference in Durban was a pivotal moment for the global recognition of intersectionality. Crenshaw's work, from 1989, helped frame the discussions around how multiple forms of discrimination, such as race and gender, interact and exacerbate one another. The conference highlighted the need to address intersectional discrimination in both legal frameworks and policies worldwide.

The 2009 conference in Frankfurt was held to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the concept of intersectionality by inspiring discussions and debates on its theory, methodology, and implementation. Kimberlé Crenshaw was a guest of honour and participant. The conference aimed to be more than just a celebration; it sought to challenge the maturity of intersectionality by addressing its ambiguities, challenges, and future potential. Conference contributions focused on adapting and applying intersectionality to understand social inequalities outside the US context. The conference's discussions were captured in a volume called *Framing Intersectionality - Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*[16], which continues to inform debates on intersectionality in Europe and globally.

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[12] S. Truth, "Ain't I a Woman?" delivered 1851, Women's Rights Convention, Old Stone Church (since demolished), Akron, Ohio. National Park Service URL: https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm (accessed 2025-10-09)
[13] F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis: Contextualizing Feminism — Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions, Feminist Review No. 15 (Winter, 1983), Published By: Sage Publications, Ltd. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1394792 (accessed 2025-12-06)
[14] Ibid. p.64
[15] Anthias and Yuval-Davis also give credit to Valerie Amos, Pratibha Parmar, and Amina Mama, who (they write in a note) all presented analyses that stressed the importance of studying the way in which the fusion of ethnic, gender and class divisions for black women gave a specificity to their oppression, in a series of seminars organised by the Thames Polytechnic Sociology Division on Gender and Ethnic Divisions. I haven't found any further documentation online of these seminars.
[16] H. Lutz, M. T. Herrera Vivar, L. Supik (eds.), Framing Intersectionality - Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany, Routledge (2011)

Notably, the concept and idea of intersectionality did not originate within academia. Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that intersectionality emerged at the border-crossing between social movements and academia. Hill Collins also underlines that this "border-crossing is multi-directional"[17], and the concept moves back and forth, which means, she says, that "intersectionality is always under construction"[18].

In the next section, I turn to the academic debates surrounding intersectionality. What quickly becomes evident is that the concept appears deceptively simple in both theory and practice. Yet the deeper one delves, the more intricate it becomes. As Hill Collins notes, intersectionality's definitional dilemma lies in "defining the field neither so narrowly that it reflects the interests of any one segment nor so broadly that its very popularity causes it to lose meaning."[19]

A recurring observation in the literature is that it can be more productive to examine what intersectionality *does* rather than to fixate on what it *is*[20]. Therefore, I conclude this essay by examining projects across diverse contexts in which intersectionality has been applied, often with challenges, to advance inclusivity and address inequality.

2: Academic discussions on intersectionality

In this section, I highlight several central debates within contemporary intersectionality scholarship. Although the wider field is both extensive and technically complex, I focus on five key issues: (1) models of discrimination, (2) intersectional methodology, (3) concerns about alleged power-blindness and the "whitening" of the concept, (4) the shifting boundaries and travelling character of intersectionality, and (5) the range of categories and social identities it incorporates.

Models of discrimination

One early discussion on intersectionality was around additive or compound models of discrimination. In the 80s in the UK, Black Women were sometimes described as suffering under triple oppression, or "triple state of bondage".[21] This was challenged as a simplistic model that treated social divisions as separate or additive, proposing that these divisions are mutually constitutive and form complex, overlapping systems of power and oppression. Anthias

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293318155_Framing_Intersectionality_Debates_on_a_multi-faceted_concept_in_gender_studies (accessed 2025-12-06)

[17] P. Hill Collins, Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice, Kindle edition, (Routledge 2019) p.4

[18] Ibid. p.115

[19] P. Hill Collins, Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas, Annual Review of Sociology, Volume 41 – 15. Introduction https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142

[20] S. Cho, K. W. Crenshaw and L. McCall, Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory (Summer 2013), The University of Chicago Press, p.787, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669608 (accessed 2025-12-04) and H. Lutz, Intersectionality's (brilliant) career – how to understand the attraction of the concept? P. 10 Working Paper Series "Gender, Diversity and Migration", No.1 (2014) Goethe Universität, Fachbereich Gesellschaftswissenschaften, Institut für Soziologie, https://d-nb.info/1124539840/34 (accessed 2025-11-30)

[21] B. Bryan, S. Dadzie, S. Scafe, The Heart of the Race, Black Lives in Britain, Virago Press (1985) p.20 https://prod-cdn.atria.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/01/21144006/WLUK-0860681613-gecomprimeerd.pdf (accessed 2025-12-06)

and Yuval-Davis[22] also argued against an additive model and in favour of the need to contextualise feminist analysis, recognising that women's experiences differ significantly based on their specific social positions, which are shaped by the complex interplay of class, ethnicity, and gender. They argued that there is no such thing as suffering from oppression 'as Black' separately, 'as a woman' separately, or 'as a working-class person' separately. Instead, each social division possesses a distinct ontological basis that is irreducible to the others, because they are "enmeshed in each other and the particular intersections involved produce specific effects".[23]

While intersectionality scholars primarily critique additive models in favour of compound, interactive models, some proponents of additive effect models within intersectionality include researchers like Else-Quest and Hyde (2016)[24]. The authors draw a clear distinction between an additive analytic approach and additive effects, particularly within the context of intersectionality research. They do not propose an additive model in the sense of a purely additive analytic approach, because that would mean treating social categories independently rather than as intertwined and interconnected, making "additive analytic approaches antithetical to intersectionality".[25] While rejecting the *approach*, the authors argue that additive effects are an essential part of intersectionality that warrants examination.

The authors argue that the main difference lies in how they conceptualise the relationship between social categories and in their relation to the core principles of intersectionality. As an example, in a quantitative intersectional analysis of gender and sexual orientation, a White lesbian could experience sexism *as well as* heterosexism incrementally. The approach must also account for multiplicative effects (where "the effects of sexism might exacerbate the effects of heterosexism"[26]) and unique intersectional effects (where belonging to both categories creates a different form of discrimination).

In contrast, most scholars using additive models do so to highlight the limitations of this approach, arguing that additive effects fail to capture the complex, interwoven nature of intersecting identities, as described by the core principles of intersectionality. Hill Collins is one of the critics and is also credited with introducing the concept of the Matrix of Domination. She contrasts intersectionality and the matrix of domination by saying (1990): "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice. In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized".[27] The matrix of domination can also be applied as a way for people to acknowledge their privileges in society.

Intersectional methodology

Another important topic in the debate has been the methodology of intersectionality, or lack thereof. Some say the openness of the concept is its main attraction, since it can serve as a

[22] F. Anthias, F. and N. Yuval-Davis: Contextualizing Feminism — Gender, Ethnic and Class Divisions, Feminist Review No. 15 (Winter, 1983), Published By: Sage Publications, Ltd. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1394792 (accessed 2025-12-06)
[23] Ibid. p.63
[24] N. M. Else-Quest and Hyde, Intersectionality in Quantitative Psychological Research: I. Theoretical and Epistemological Issues, Psychology of Women Quarterly · June 2016 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0361684316629797 (accessed 2025-12-12)
[25] Ibid., p.162
[26] Ibid, p.162
[27] P. Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought, Routledge, 2nd ed. (2009) p.18

mental shortcut for approaching complexity. If 'having an intersectional approach' means being aware of discrimination in general, it risks becoming a floating signifier,[28] maybe attractive and easy to use, but almost devoid of meaning.

The main methodological challenge of intersectionality is the complexity of analysing multiple, overlapping social categories simultaneously, which requires new approaches to capture how these different aspects of identity interconnect to create unique experiences of privilege or discrimination. This complexity arises because the analysis moves beyond single-axis categories (just gender or just race) to examine how they intersect and interact.

Intersectionality, despite its complexity, should be understood as a way of thinking and analysing, not just a concept with a specific name, history, or set of citations. As outlined by Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013)[29], truly intersectional analysis recognises how categories like race, class, and gender are interconnected and constantly shaped by power dynamics, rather than existing as separate, fixed entities. This approach emphasizes the practical work of analysing power and difference over simply identifying as "intersectionality".[30] It is a way of thinking about and conducting analyses, or an "analytic sensibility[31]. It focuses on what intersectionality does in practice, rather than on defining intersectionality as a fixed concept.

This analytic sensibility must focus on how categories like race, class, and gender overlap and are shaped by power dynamics to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Cho et al. underline that intersectionality is often described by what it is *not*, which contributes to its complexity, and that it has been described more as a "nodal point",[32] a place for discussions, rather than as a defined theoretical system.

The core purpose of social justice, as underlined by many researchers, which animates intersectionality, can be maintained in research practice through an explicit commitment to ethical principles, rigorous methodological engagement, and resistance against the theory's depoliticisation and misappropriation. Rice, Harrison, and Friedman (2019) underline that "Intersectionality orients to social justice, so research utilizing intersectional analysis must commit to justice in its processes and knowledge production."[33]

Alleged power-blindness and 'whitening' of intersectionality

Some interpreters of intersectionality have been accused of "whitening" the concept and are seen as an attempt to disassociate the concept from the women of colour who created it.

[28] Oxford Reference: Floating signifier. A signifier without a specific signified. Also known as an 'empty signifier', it is a signifier that absorbs rather than emits meaning. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095824238 (accessed 2025-10-01)
[29] S. Cho, K.W. Crenshaw, L. McCall: Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis. Signs, Vol. 38, No. 4, Intersectionality: Theorizing Power, Empowering Theory (2013) The University of Chicago Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669608 (accessed 2025-12-07)
[30] Ibid., p.795
[31] Ibid. P.795
[32] Ibid. p.788
[33] C. Rice, E. Harrison, M. Friedman, Doing justice to intersectionality in research, Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708619829779 (accessed 2025-11-05)

Barbara Tomlinson (2019)[34] and Vivian M. May (2015)[35] have both examined critics and interpreters of intersectionality in detail, and they also use terms such as “power-blind” and “colour-blind” when addressing these critics and interpreters.

For one perspective on how and why intersectionality has been interpreted in certain ways over the past decades, let’s revisit the volume *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*[36], which captured the 2009 Frankfurt conference discussions. Here, the authors explore how ideas such as intersectionality "travel" across borders and are re-articulated and interpreted in new social and political settings, comparing the US origins of the concept with its reception in Europe. Their explorations can explicate how some of the interpretations have veered far from the concept’s original iteration.

The key aspects to understanding the travel of intersectionality involve recognising that ideas are profoundly shaped by the contexts in which they emerge and how they are subsequently received, re-articulated, and translated across geographical and theoretical borders. Discussions of intersectionality have been shaped by national contexts, histories of feminist thought, and language, influencing how the concept is understood and applied across different regions. I will refer to how the concept was received explicitly in the UK, Germany, and Scandinavia, as referred to in the volume mentioned above.

The concept entered British debates relatively quickly, gaining significant traction from the mid-1990s onward. Its rapid uptake was eased by the fact that UK feminism was already engaged in vibrant discussions about “differences” among women.[37] Foundational work by scholars such as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1983) had long examined the interconnections among “race,” class, and gender as forms of intersection, providing an intellectual groundwork for the ready integration of intersectionality.

Moreover, the UK’s long-standing tradition of state-supported anti-discrimination policy, beginning with the Race Relations Act of 1965, had normalised public and academic conversations about race and ethnicity. This institutional landscape helped ensure that British gender studies naturally took up questions central to intersectionality.

In Germany, intersectionality initially gained only limited traction within women’s and gender studies, appearing mainly in research on racism and migration. One major challenge in the German context concerned the term *Rasse* (race)[38]. Because of the enduring legacy of colonial and Nazi racial ideologies, *Rasse* had become a deeply stigmatized and “negative category,” largely avoided in social-scientific debate and replaced with terms such as *ethnicity* or *racialisation*. This linguistic avoidance, however, made it harder to address racism explicitly and analytically.

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[34] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality: the perils of powerblind feminism, TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS (2019) https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28)

[35] V.M. May Pursuing intersectionality, unsettling dominant imaginaries, Routledge (2015) https://chinesefeminism.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/vivian_m_may_pursuing_intersectionality_unsettl.pdf (accessed 2025-12-08)

[36] H. Lutz, M. T. H. Vivar, L. Supik: Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies, Ashgate (2011) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293318155_Framing_Intersectionality_Debates_on_a_multi-faceted_concept_in_gender_studies (accessed 2025-10-15)

[37] Ibid., preface

[38] Ibid., P.10

Additionally, the historical development of the German women's movement, shaped by its ties to the labour movement, diverged significantly from the US women's movement's engagement with Black civil rights struggles. These differences created complex translation problems when introducing intersectionality into German debates. Establishing a robust theoretical foundation in Germany, therefore, requires engaging with multiple genealogies, including the histories of disabled women's movements, migrant women's organising, Jewish German women's activism, and Black feminist interventions within the German context.

In the Scandinavian countries, e.g., Sweden, intersectionality was received with discussions around decentring gender and extending gender to include "sexuality, with particular attention to heteronormativity."[39] Carbin & Edenheim (2013)[40] describe a public and heated debate, where some feminists criticised the decentring of gender, and were accused of being "white-centred" and failing to address the unique struggles faced by immigrant women. Others accused the proponents of decentring gender of being divisive and undermining the feminist movement by creating a rift within its ranks. It is interesting to note that Sweden gradually removed the word "race" from its national legislation between 2009 and 2014, replacing it with "ethnicity," along with "culture" and "religion" as related concepts, to address discrimination.

In Europe, particularly within the European Union (EU), intersectionality was re-articulated through a top-down legal framework, contrasting with the US context where Kimberlé Crenshaw's work originated in jurisprudence but spread through a bottom-up movement.

Acknowledging that ideas are influenced and shaped by local contexts highlights the tension between legitimate reinterpretation and the point at which adaptation becomes misinterpretation or appropriation.

Accusations of "whitening" intersectionality mean that, simply put, interpreters have stripped it of its anti-Black feminist and anti-racist origins, focusing instead on a version that centres white, Western experiences of gender and class. This is criticized for downplaying or ignoring the unique and intensified forms of oppression faced by people of colour, thus diluting the concept's radical potential and turning it into a more palatable framework for a white-dominated culture.

Key aspects of this critique are that it detaches the concept from its Black feminist foundation while centring white women's experiences, which are different from those of women of colour. By softening its radical critique of white supremacy, "whitened" intersectionality can become a depoliticised academic or corporate diversity concept. It loses its power to challenge the systems of oppression that gave it birth.

Some critiques, such as Christoffersen and Emejulu (2023),[41] point out that a "whitened" approach can become additive (what the authors call "diversity within") instead of intersectional.[42] This approach may add categories like race or ethnicity to a default framework

[39] H. Lutz, M. T. H. Vivar, L. Supik: Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies, Ashgate (2011) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/293318155_Framing_Intersectionality_Debates_on_a_multi-faceted_concept_in_gender_studies (accessed 2025-10-15), introduction. P.5

[40] M. Carbin & S. Edenheim: The intersectional turn in feminist theory: A dream of a common language? Article *in* European Journal of Women's Studies · August 2013, P.12 DOI: 10.1177/1350506813484723

[41] A. Christoffersen, A. Emejulu: "Diversity Within": The Problems with "Intersectional" White Feminism in Practice, Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, Volume 30, Issue 2, Summer 2023, Pages, introduction https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac044 (accessed 2025-11-01)

[42] Ibid., p.2-3 primarily and throughout the article.

of whiteness and class, rather than interrogating how these categories are fundamentally interconnected and shape each other.

Sirma Bilge (2013)[43] critiques several trends in contemporary feminist academic discourse that, she argues, dilute intersectionality's critical and political force. According to Bilge, a form of "disciplinary academic feminism"[44] aligned with neoliberal[45] values often appropriate feminist language while shifting attention away from structural inequalities toward individual empowerment, success, and resilience. This move, she argues, weakens the potential of intersectionality for collective action and social justice.

Bilge identifies two specific argumentative trends that depoliticise the concept. The first treats intersectionality as a purely abstract or methodological exercise, severed from its activist origins and material commitments. The second "whitens" intersectionality by framing it as a creation of feminism alone, thereby downplaying its deeper roots in Black feminist thought and struggles against racial injustice. These framings, she argues, diminish the theory's original emphasis on race and transform it into an academic tool rather than a framework for challenging systemic power.

Both Bilge and Tomlinson clarify that whiteness in this case is not an embodied colour but an epistemological condition, and that "one does not need to be White to 'whiten intersectionality'".[46]

Tomlinson mentions several examples in her critique of what she calls The Epistemic Machine,[47] which she claims has excluded Black feminists from the discussion, and that European feminists have taken all the credit for a broader interpretation of intersectionality as a theory. Tomlinson argues that intersectionality has been co-opted by a neoliberal academy, becoming a product used for superficial inclusion rather than the radical tool for social justice it was intended to be.

Tomlinson identifies several critics and their works, whose analyses are examined for contributing to the systematic misrepresentation of intersectionality. I have selected a range of critics that Tomlinson mentions, aiming to provide a fair representation and understanding of the debate.

According to Tomlinson, Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker accused intersectional thinking of being caught in what Tomlinson calls the "vise of geometry",[48] and relying on

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[43] S. Bilge: Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies, Du Bois Review, 10:2 (2013) 405–424. https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28)

[44] Ibid. Abstract

[45] Merriam-Webster: neoliberal: a liberal who supports or promotes free market competition and sustained economic growth through capitalism as a means for achieving progresshttps://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/neoliberal (accessed 2025-11-01)

[46] S. Bilge: Intersectionality Undone: Saving Intersectionality from Feminist Intersectionality Studies, Du Bois Review, 10:2 (2013) p. 413. doi:10.10170S1742058X13000283 AND B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – the Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019) https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28). Tomlinson quotes Bilge on page 150.

[47] B. Tomlinson, Undermining intersectionality, Intersectionality – the Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), chapter 9. https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28)

[48] B. Tomlinson, Undermining intersectionality, Intersectionality – the Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), p 97-99, https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-

inadequate "mathematical metaphors".[49] West and Fenstermaker mention a “peculiar trend” in 1995, about using mathematical metaphors in feminist scholarship, and in a later article, they phrase it as “geometry came into play”.[50] Tomlinson is critical of what she calls a “reductive framing of the metaphor of intersectionality”.[51]

Tomlinson also criticises West and Fenstermaker for using straw person fallacies and "bad ventriloquism" (“articulating a false and deeply inadequate representation of an intersectional metaphor or argument as if accurately repeating the original”,[52]) by presenting simplified arguments of women of colour as typical positions. In addition, Tomlinson criticises West and Fenstermaker when they allegedly claim to "discover" simultaneity,[53] (that gender, race, and class are experienced simultaneously), a concept already established by scholars of colour.

Tomlinson also mentions Leslie McCall, who, Tomlinson says, illustrates "neoliberal asset-stripping" by erasing the racial specificity of intersectionality's originators and claiming the concept as a product of "women's studies."[54] This is what Tomlinson claims is "color-blinding rhetoric,"[55] on McCall’s part, which diminishes and trivialises the conceptual labour of women of colour.

Furthermore, Tomlinson criticises Wendy Brown for alleging that multidimensional concepts (including intersectionality) are failing to "fully explaining or theorizing ... the complex workings of power that converge at the site of identity."[56] Tomlinson says that Brown also systematically misrepresented the positions of Aída Hurtado and Patricia Hill Collins[57]. Brown's text is widely

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feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28) referring to C. West, S. Fenstermaker, Doing Difference, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1. (1995) p.2 https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Doing%20Difference.pdf

[49] B. Tomlinson, Undermining intersectionality, Intersectionality – the Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), P.99, referring to C. West, S. Fenstermaker, Doing Difference, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1. (1995) p.8-12 & p.30 https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Doing%20Difference.pdf

[50] C. West, S. Fenstermaker, Doing Gender, Doing Difference, Inequality, Power and Institutional Change, Routledge (2002), p. 245 https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203615683/gender-difference-sarah-fenstermaker-candace-west

[51] B. Tomlinson, Undermining intersectionality, Intersectionality – the Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019). p.66

[52] Ibid., p.198

[53] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019) 88-89 https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28), referring to C. West, S. Fenstermaker, Doing Difference, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1. (1995), p. 83 and 116. https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Doing%20Difference.pdf

[54] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), p.82 https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28) referring to L.McCall, The Complexity of Intersectionality, Signs, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Spring 2005), The University of Chicago Press. Introduction. URL http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426800

[55] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), p.82, https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28), referring to L. McCall, The Complexity of Intersectionality, Signs, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Spring 2005), The University of Chicago Press. Introduction. URL http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/426800

[56] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), p.82, https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28), referring to W. Brown, The Impossibility of Women’s Studies, differences (1997) 9 (3), p 94. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-9-3-79 (accessed 2025-12-28)

[57] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), p.122, https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28), referring to W. Brown, The Impossibility of Women’s Studies, differences (1997) 9 (3), p 86. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-9-3-79 (accessed 2025-12-28)

cited, says Tomlinson, even though it operates as a "license to criticize intersectionality"[58] based on flawed arguments.

Kathy Davis is also mentioned in Tomlinson's critique for using begrudging and negative language, calling intersectionality a "buzzword"[59] and "chimerical".[60] (A chimera is a fabled, grotesque monster.)

While trying to understand the different standpoints and iterations of the concept, in a sometimes-heated discussion, one of the main tensions is whether intersectionality must or should be tied to its original context. Helma Lutz argues that a travelling concept of intersectionality inevitably involves amendments, but stresses that intersectionality must remain embedded in its specific social and historical setting rather than becoming a "free-floating signifier".[61][62] Two of the key debates are the centrality of race and the amendment of categories beyond the original race-class-gender triangle. Lutz also introduces her own approach, "doing intersectionality,"[63] which focuses on how individuals dynamically negotiate their multiple identities as a methodological tool for analysis, rather than viewing them only as subjects determined by oppressive structures.

If we look at how the two 'Nestoras'[64] of the intersectionality debate, Hill Collins and Crenshaw analyse and explain the interpretation of intersectionality; both are clear in their analyses.

Crenshaw says: "There is a sense that efforts to repackage intersectionality for universal consumption require a re-marginalising of black women. This instinct reflects a fatal transmission error of 'Demarginalising's' central argument: that representations of gender that are 'race-less' are not by that fact alone more universal than those that are race-specific."[65]

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[58] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019), p.122. https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28)

[59] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019, p. 187, https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28), referring to K. Davis, Intersectionality as Buzzword - A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. In the title and on p. 75. Feminist Theory, Sage (2008) https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1464700108086364 (accessed 2025-12-12)

[60] B. Tomlinson, Undermining Intersectionality – The Perils of Powerblind Feminism, Temple University Press (2019, p. 187, referring to K. Davis, Intersectionality as Buzzword - A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. P. 70. Feminist Theory, Sage (2008) https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1464700108086364 (accessed 2025-12--12)

[61] H. Lutz, Intersectionality's (brilliant) career – how to understand the attraction of the concept? Working paper series "Gender Diversity Migration" No 1, 2024. No.1 (2014) Abstract. Goethe Universität, Fachbereich Gesellschaftswissenschaften, Institut für Soziologie, https://d-nb.info/1124539840/34 (accessed 2025-11-30)

[62] Oxford Reference: Floating signifier. A signifier without a specific signified. Also known as an 'empty signifier', it is a signifier that absorbs rather than emits meaning. https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095824238 (accessed 2025-10-01)

[63] Ibid. Abstract and p.12

[64] Nestora, a female version of the word 'nestor', meaning a leader in a field. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Nestor (accessed 2025-11-10)

[65] Helma Lutz quotes Crenshaw in the introduction to her article Intersectionality's (brilliant) career – how to understand the attraction of the concept, Working paper series "Gender Diversity Migration" No 1, 2024. No.1 (2014) Abstract. Goethe Universität, Fachbereich Gesellschaftswissenschaften, Institut für Soziologie, https://d-nb.info/1124539840/34 (accessed 2025-11-30), which is taken from: Crenshaw, K. (2011): 'Postscript'. In: H. Lutz, M.T. Herrera Vivar and L. Supik (eds.): *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*. P. 221 Farnham etc.: Ashgate, 224.

When engaging with Kimberlé Crenshaw, a central figure in Critical Race Theory (CRT),[66] it is essential to recognize that the concept of intersectionality, along with the foundational concerns it articulates, has been profoundly consequential for CRT. In her article, "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward" (2011)[67], Crenshaw underscores that intersectionality shaped the movement's origins, informed its internal debates, defined its critical mission, and continues to guide its evolving trajectory. Crenshaw conceptualizes CRT as a dynamic *"intellectual project"*[68] rooted in specific historical, political, and institutional contexts.

Crenshaw contends that post-racialism[69] functions as an ideological weapon that suppresses conversations about racial injustice, and she calls for a renewed vision of CRT that integrates "transdisciplinary critique"[70] to resist such erasures. She asserts that the next turn in CRT must be "decidedly interdisciplinary, intersectional, and cross-institutional".[71] The centrality of intersectionality to CRT becomes evident through its historical and conceptual development: from its inception, CRT identified the complex interplay of hierarchies—race, gender, class, and beyond—as integral to understanding the multifaceted operations of power.

Hill Collins, in "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas",[72] addresses the complexities and ambiguities surrounding the definition of intersectionality. She claims that the concept's core focus on power relations and social inequalities is weakened or obscured in academic settings by several interconnected factors related to the institutionalisation, intellectual dilution, and political avoidance inherent in how critical theories "travel" into the established academy. Intersectionality's foundational purpose – "*raison d'être* lies in its attentiveness to power relations and social inequalities".[73] The process of incorporating this framework into scholarly venues often obscures its critical edge.

A recurring observation, from Hill Collins, is that when critical intellectual projects like intersectionality migrate from their social movement origins into academic institutions, they risk losing their critical edge and transformative intent. As noted earlier, part of intersectionality's broad appeal stems from the fact that its overarching frameworks remain wide and relatively unspecified. This openness creates an illusion of consensus under a large "overarching umbrella",[74] even as the many smaller, and sometimes competing, knowledge projects beneath

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[66] According to Merriam Webster, Critical Race Theory is a group of concepts (such as the idea that race is a sociological rather than biological designation, and that racism pervades society and is fostered and perpetuated by the legal system) used for examining the relationship between race and the laws and legal institutions of a country and especially the United States https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/critical%20race%20theory#:~:text=:%20a%20group%20of%20concepts%20(such,and%20the%20laws%20and%20legal (accessed 2025-12-01)

[67] K. W. Crenshaw, Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward, 43 43 Conn. L. Rev. 1253 (2011). https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/2864 (accessed 2025-10-15)

[68] Ibid., p.1259

[69] Post-racial means, according to Merriam-Webster, "having overcome or moved beyond racism**:** having reached a stage or time at which racial prejudice no longer exists or is no longer a major social problem." https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/post-racial (accessed 20025-12-02)

[70] K. W. Crenshaw, Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward, 43 43 Conn. L. Rev. 1253 (2011). https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/2864 (accessed 2025-10-15) p.1253

[71] Ibid. p. 1262

[72] P. Hill Collins, Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas, Annu. Rev. Sociology. 2015. 41:1–20 10. Doi 1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142 https://edspace.american.edu/culturallysustainingclassrooms/wp-content/uploads/sites/1030/2017/09/annurev-soc-073014-112142.pdf (accessed 2025-12-03)

[73] Ibid. Abstract.

[74] Ibid. P. 5.

it expose deep disagreements about the concept's history, structure, and future direction. Such definitional ambiguity makes it difficult to maintain a consistently rigorous, power-attentive standard across the field.

Both Hill Collins and Crenshaw underline that contemporary narratives often obscure the deep historical links between intersectionality and social justice movements, particularly US Black feminism and the intellectual production of women of colour, by situating the framework's origins solely within academia. This rhetorical strategy often favours mentioning the "coining" of the term over engaging with its substantive ideas about interlocking oppressions and social change.

Meanwhile, in academic contexts where scholars are often implicitly or explicitly encouraged to maintain distance from overt political commitments, intersectionality's role as critical praxis risks becoming increasingly diluted. As the concept circulates across diverse interpretive communities, its original purpose as a radical, structural critique of power is frequently softened. What emerges is a broad conceptual "sensibility" or a descriptive tool for categorisation, more institutionally palatable, but markedly less politically potent.

Travelling concept

Intersectionality has not remained static or self-contained; instead, it has evolved through continuous movement across disciplines, sectors, and national contexts.

This movement of intersectionality has significantly shaped its evolution. As it travels, as pointed out in Crenshaw et al. (2013),[75] the concept continually adapts to new intellectual and political terrains, shifting from a specific intervention grounded in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory into an "analysis-in-progress",[76] that remains dynamic, contested, and persistently reinterpreted.

The overall theoretical trajectory has been characterized by broadening the scope of the analysis and reinforcing the idea that the theory is never done or exhausted by its prior articulations. A central theoretical outcome of intersectionality's movement is the understanding that it makes little sense to frame the concept as a contained entity. Instead, an alternative approach, as I mentioned previously, is to "assess what intersectionality does",[77] as a starting point for thinking about what else it might be mobilised to perform.

While the theory originated in an article focusing on race and gender issues, in a legal environment (specifically, the Black female experience), the theoretical trajectory has moved beyond this initial focus, demonstrating that it is "not fixed to any particular social position. The theory can and does move."[78] Intersectionality is continually movable to other social contexts and group formations. The movement suggests that there is always potentially another set of concerns, places, and structures of power to which the theory can be directed.

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[75] K. Crenshaw, D.W. Carbado, V. M. Mays, B. Tomlinson. "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." *Du Bois Rev*. 2013.10(2): 303– 312. https://doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349 (accessed 2025-12-05)
[76] Ibid. p.2
[77] Ibid. p. 3
[78] K. Crenshaw, D.W. Carbado, V. M. Mays, B. Tomlinson. "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." *Du Bois Rev*. 2013.10(2): 303– 312. P. 4 https://doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349(accessed 2025-12-05)

Crenshaw et.al. make it clear that intersectionality's engagement with a range of issues, social identities, and systems has facilitated its movement within and across disciplines, transcending boundaries and building interdisciplinary bridges. In social psychology, intersectionality challenges disciplinary conventions that impede thinking about how race and gender mutually construct each other. It critiques the tendency to posit prototypical targets of racism (Black men) and sexism (White women), thereby identifying how standard research methodologies can "marginalize Black women".[79]

In social science research, scholars are encouraged to draw on empirical data that are not necessarily defined as intersectional and to construct intersectional prisms throughout the research cycle to generate new insights. Intersectionality has also been mobilised to incorporate new categories of experience, such as sexuality, in relation to race and constitutional law.

Intersectionality's global circulation has extended the theory's reach into international discourses, enabling it to illuminate historically specific dynamics and challenge entrenched global power relations. In Europe, where it is sometimes framed as a "North American import,"[80] some feminist discourses have sought to distance intersectionality from its association with race in the United States. As Sirma Bilge points out, this movement has sometimes resulted in argumentative rhetorics that "neutralize the political potential of intersectionality,"[81] such as explicitly framing it as a feminist project distinct from a racial project—a move that effectively can be seen as whitening intersectionality. This shift highlights how movement can lead to the depoliticization[82] of the theory within disciplinary academic settings.

International engagements reveal an underlying *anxiety*[83] regarding the sustained emphasis on Black women within a generalized theory of power. Nevertheless, the theory's application by scholars and practitioners of varied genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations has substantiated its broader analytical utility. These diverse appropriations both attest to the theory's capacity to illuminate a widening array of experiences and power configurations and reaffirm that the critical interrogation of Black women's positionalities remains intellectually generative and theoretically indispensable

The ongoing movement has prompted scholars to refine the theory, enabling them to engage more precisely with the differentiated experiences of oppression and structural disadvantage.

Overall, intersectionality's evolution shows that its power lies not in conceptual stability but in movement. As it travels across disciplines, sectors, and national contexts, the concept continually adapts, shifting from a specific intervention rooted in Black feminist legal theory into a dynamic, contested analytic that gains meaning through use. Rather than a fixed framework, intersectionality functions as an evolving practice — its value measured by what it enables researchers, practitioners, and activists to uncover about systems of inequality.

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[79] K. Crenshaw, D.W. Carbado, V. M. Mays, B. Tomlinson. "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." *Du Bois Rev*. 2013.10(2): 303– 312. P. 6 https://doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349(accessed 2025-12-05).
[80] Ibid. P.6
[81] S. Bilge, INTERSECTIONALITY UNDONE, Saving Intersectionality from Feminist, Intersectionality Studies, introduction, Du Bois Review, 10:2 (2013) 405–424. https://dokumen.pub/undermining-intersectionality-the-perils-of-powerblind-feminism-1439916500-9781439916506.html (accessed 2025-12-28)
[82] Ibid., introduction
[83] K. Crenshaw, D.W. Carbado, V. M. Mays, B. Tomlinson. "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory," *Du Bois Rev*. 2013.10(2): 303– 312. P. 3 https://doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349(accessed 2025-12-05)

This mobility has broadened intersectional inquiry beyond its early focus on race and gender, opening analytical space for additional categories, structures, and contexts. It has challenged disciplinary assumptions, expanded methodological possibilities, and invited new empirical applications. At the same time, global circulation reveals how movement can dilute the concept's political force — for example, when intersectionality is reframed as a race-neutral or gender-only tool. Such shifts risk obscuring its origins and weakening its structural critique, even as diverse adopters continue to demonstrate its broad analytical utility.

Despite these tensions, intersectionality remains an unfinished project—one that evolves precisely because new forms of inequality and power demand new conceptual tools. Its ongoing travel invites us, time and again, to ask not only what intersectionality is but also *what it can do*: how it can expose overlooked harms, trace interlocking systems of domination, and support more rigorous and transformative approaches to justice.

The discussion that follows interrogates which categories and social identities are, or might be, constitutive of an intersectional analytic framework.

Categories and social identities in intersectionality

Initially, intersectionality concentrated on the interplay between race and gender, conceptualising these as interlocking social processes that co-produce lived experience. Although much of the foundational scholarship centres on these core vectors, as pointed out by Crenshaw et al., "Actors of different genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations have moved intersectionality to engage an ever-widening range of experiences and structures of power."[84] Together, these dimensions critically inform the experiences of women of colour. Yet they are often only partially addressed or overlooked in analyses that focus primarily on race and gender.

A persistent tension within intersectionality scholarship lies in the tendency to use a specific subject group as the paradigmatic instance of intersectional experience. Black women have frequently been positioned as the quintessential intersectional subjects, serving as the foundation for claims to complex and multiply constituted identities. Intersectionality originally emerged to illuminate how race and gender intersect to structure the multidimensional realities of Black women's lives, recovering the identities and political claims of those excluded from both racial discourses, through patriarchal assumptions, and feminist discourse, through racial normativity.

While scholars continue to mobilise the narratives of Black women to expose the under-theorised conditions of multiply discriminated subjects, this reliance can risk constructing Black women as, in the words of Jennifer Nash, "a unitary and monolithic entity".[85] Such representations may inadvertently obscure critical intra-group differences—particularly those related to class, sexuality, and other intersecting axes of identity—by positioning "Black women" primarily in contrast to "white women" or "Black men."

Devon W. Carbado argues that "some scholars have marginalized intersectionality by assuming that the theory concerns only Black women, or only race and gender, and by arguing that intersectionality conceptualizes those social categories in fixed and static ways".[86]

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[84] K. Crenshaw, D.W. Carbado, V. M. Mays, B. Tomlinson. "INTERSECTIONALITY: Mapping the Movements of a Theory." *Du Bois Rev*. 2013.10(2): 303– 312. https://doi:10.1017/S1742058X13000349 (accessed 2025-12-09)
[85] J. Nash, re-thinking intersectionality, Sage Journals, Volume 89, Issue 1 p. 8 https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.20
[86] D.W. Carbado, Colorblind intersectionality, *38 SIGNS: JOURNAL OF WOMEN IN CULTURE AND*

Carbado proposes a broadened and reinvigorated conception of intersectionality, envisioning a framework that is radical, expansive, and insurgent, thereby challenging the narrow readings that have historically constrained its scope. This expanded vision dislodges the assumption that intersectionality pertains solely to Black women or to the intersection of race and gender, positioning it instead as a dynamic analytic for mapping power across the entire social hierarchy, including privileged and dominant positions.

Reinvigorating intersectionality entails resisting theoretical boundary policing and recognizing that its early focus reflected Crenshaw's juridical interventions rather than the theory's intrinsic limits. Carbado's suggested broadened scope extends intersectional analysis to normative categories such as whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality, exposing how these operate as invisible sites of privilege. Carbado introduces concepts such as "colorblind and gender-blind intersectionality,"[87] to illuminate how dominant identities, white, male, heterosexual, function as unmarked yet powerful intersectional positions.

Carbado's revitalized framework further incorporates a broader range of axes and processes, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, and religion, as well as classism, xenophobia, ableism, and Islamophobia, affirming intersectionality's capacity to theorise overlapping systems of domination and advantage. Finally, according to Carbado, reconnecting intersectionality with Critical Race Theory strengthens its critique of colour-blindness. It reasserts its role as a radical praxis for interrogating the normative architectures of power.

To end this section, Kwame Anthony Appiah's reflections on categories and social identities in *The Lies That Bind* (2018),[88] offer a valuable perspective for intersectional analysis. A standard critique of intersectionality is that, even as it seeks to move beyond reductive identity boxes, it may inadvertently reproduce categorical thinking by continuing to classify people through increasingly complex identity markers. Appiah does not share this criticism and treats intersectionality as an essential tool for understanding the layered, contingent nature of identity.

Appiah uses intersectionality to show how identity categories interact in culturally specific ways, exemplified by his discussion of *kothis*[89] in India — a group whose experiences of gender and sexuality cannot, he claims, be captured by Western categories. Intersectionality also helps him articulate a broader tension in contemporary identity politics: the tendency to claim epistemic authority solely based on group membership ("to speak *as a man*, or *as a white person*."[90]). Because lived experience is mediated by social treatment, intersectionality exposes the significant differences that exist even within a single labelled group—for instance, between gay and straight white men, or between a gay white Catholic man and his Protestant counterpart in Northern Ireland. Shared labels, Appiah argues, do not guarantee shared experience.

This insight underpins his more exhaustive critique of essentialism. Essentialist thinking—treating identity categories as if they possess an underlying, immutable essence—creates rigid boundaries, justifies social hierarchies, and historically facilitated racial typologies that rationalised profound injustice. Against this, Appiah proposes a social account construction of

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SOCIETY, UCLA School of Law Research Paper No. 13-19 (2013) introduction https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2291680 (accessed 2025-12-09)

[87] D.W. Carbado, Colorblind intersectionality, 38 SIGNS: JOURNAL OF WOMEN IN CULTURE AND SOCIETY, UCLA (2013), p.2, 8, 9, 10, 35.

[88] A.K. Appiah, The Lies that Bind. Rethinking Identity. Creed, Country, Colour, Class, Culture. Profile Books (2018)

[89] Ibid. p.24

[90] Ibid. p.31

identity based on three elements or features[91]: the labels we use to classify people, the "pictures" or stereotypes attached to those labels, and the norms that dictate how those so labelled are expected to behave and be treated. Intersectionality, he argues, underscores the importance of this model by showing that identities are never singular or fixed. Instead, they are multiple, fluid, and continually shaped by the social contexts in which people live, which means that labels, stereotypes, and norms always overlap and shift in ways that demand more complex analyses.

Ultimately, Appiah's argument complements intersectional theory: both reject essentialism and emphasise the complex, contested processes through which identities are formed, experienced, and transformed.

Taken together, these debates demonstrate how intersectionality has expanded far beyond its original juridical context, evolving into a broad, flexible analytic capable of interrogating identities, power structures, and epistemologies. Yet the very mobility that allows intersectionality to travel across disciplines also places it in highly public, politicised arenas, as I will outline in the next section.

3: Intersectionality debates outside of academia

In this section, I have included three examples of ongoing and recent critiques of intersectionality that occur outside academia, primarily in traditional and social media. The reason for including these discussions is that they help us understand intersectionality as a travelling concept. The debate around intersectionality outside academia is also rather vociferous and can sometimes distract from and interfere with academic exchanges. As the concept circulates outside academia, it is often reinterpreted, simplified, or distorted in ways that shape public understanding. This section examines these extra-academic critiques, not because they advance the theory, but because they influence how intersectionality is received, debated, and contested as a travelling concept.

Specific arguments against intersectionality, outside academia (but not only), often distort or exaggerate its core concept — that individuals experience overlapping and intersecting systems of oppression and privilege — to make it seem like an extreme or illogical idea. Instead of addressing how different forms of oppression interact, a strawman argument simplifies it to a one-dimensional or extreme claim. A strawman argument might claim intersectionality ignores the "white male" experience, instead of acknowledging that the original theory focuses on how multiple marginalized identities can create specific forms of discrimination that are often overlooked by systems focused on a single identity. The distorted version is then attacked, and the attacker claims to have "refuted" intersectionality, even though they were never arguing against its actual principles. These fallacies misrepresent the goal of intersectionality: to reveal how different identities interact to shape experiences and to advocate for more equitable systems.

One vocal critic of intersectionality is Ben Shapiro, a well-known conservative US commentator. In a speech at Cornell University, Shapiro said that "intersectional wokeness must die" and defined "intersectional wokeness" as a "hideous ideology". This ideology, he said, assumes that "if one group is underperforming economically, it must be that they've been victimized by the

[91] A.K. Appiah, The Lies that Bind. Rethinking Identity. Creed, Country, Colour, Class, Culture. Profile Books (2018), p.xiii

overarching system, … and if one group has succeeded, that means that they must be exploiters." [92]

Shapiro's critique aligns with a broader conservative perspective that emphasises individual responsibility and has less focus on systemic issues. This conservative critique doesn't argue with the intersectional analysis itself, but the fact that it seems to downplay individual agency and responsibility and instead focuses on group-based disadvantages.

Another recent concept and strawman interpretation of intersectionality's argued outcomes is right-wing intersectionality (RWI)[93]. RWI refers to the phenomenon where right-wing political actors and movements use intersectional analysis to challenge progressive politics and mobilise support, often by attacking groups and ideas they perceive as threats to their values and hierarchies. It involves combining different social and political issues, like race, gender, and class, to target perceived enemies and shape public opinion.

Instead of critiquing the idea of intersectionality itself, RWI uses it to analyse and critique perceived threats from progressive movements, particularly those focused on race, gender, and sexuality. RWI interprets intersectionality in ways that challenge or undermine progressive goals. RWI can involve constructing narratives where right-wing groups or individuals are portrayed as the victims of progressive policies or movements. For instance, RWI can involve using intersectional arguments to challenge LGBTQ+ rights, arguing that they undermine traditional family structures or religious values.

One interesting example of a recent critique and mention of intersectionality is by Rutger Bregman, in his popular book Moral Ambition (2025)[94]. In this book, he explores how individuals can use their talents to make a meaningful impact on the world. In one of the chapters, he asks the question of why it seems so hard these days for activists to forge a coalition. He answers that it has something to do with a key doctrine of modern progressives: *intersectionality*. "That's the understanding that people are often discriminated against based on multiple, overlapping factors, like gender, ethnicity, class, education, age, sexual orientation, disability, and so on. Intersectionality means that we can't study different forms of discrimination and oppression separately, but only as interrelated phenomena. That's without a doubt an important insight. Countless social issues are woven together in complex ways, and you'd think this realisation would provide the basis for a broad movement to fight inequality and discrimination."

He continues: "But there's also a risk associated with centring this tenet. What if intersectionality thinking turns into a litmus test for every form of collaboration? What happens if the duty to declare your solidarity with anyone and everyone is just too much, stifling cooperation instead of facilitating it? And what if you then lose sight of your original goal?"

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[92] C. MacCorkle, A. Shorewala, D. Shlufman, D. France-Miller, and B. Leynse. 'Intersectional Wokeness Must Die': Ben Shapiro Brings Conservative Perspective to Cornell, The Cornell Daily Sun (29 Oct. 2024). https://www.cornellsun.com/article/2024/10/intersectional-wokeness-must-die-ben-shapiro-brings-conservative-perspective-to-cornell

[93] I haven't found the specific origin of RWI as a concept, but it is mentioned in at least one academic article about the use of RWI in Latin America: P. Ravecca, M. Schenck, B. Fonseca, & D. Forteza, D. (2022). What are they doing *right*? Tweeting right-wing intersectionality in Latin America. *Globalizations*, (2021) *20*(1), 38–59. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349725137_What_are_they_doing_right_Tweeting_right-wing_intersectionality_in_Latin_America https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.2025292

[94] R. Bregman, Moral Ambition: Stop Wasting Your Talent and Start Making a Difference, Hardcover – May 6, 2025. Bloomsbury. Erica Moore (transl.) P. 76-78

Bregman gives an example of this uncompromising attitude: In June 2022, three days before the US Supreme Court scrapped the right to abortion, the country's main pro-choice organisation, NARAL, tweeted this: If your feminism doesn't include trans women and girls, it's ✊ not ✊ feminism ✊.

And: If your feminism doesn't understand how anti-trans policies disproportionately impact BIPOC folks, particularly Black trans women and girls, it's ✊ not ✊ feminism ✊

Bregman argues that with this uncompromising attitude, you shut out loads of potential allies. Then you end up with a movement that's 100 percent pure, but 0 percent effective. And no, he says, the pursuit of purity isn't just a theoretical problem. Left-wing journalism outlet the *Intercept* published a high-profile investigation in 2022 on how nearly all progressive interest groups in the US had 'more or less effectively ceased to function' due to internal disputes. Activists continued to write each other off for all manner of minor missteps and mistakes.

Intersectionality is probably not an organising tool at all, more of an awareness tool, a spotlight to focus on areas of discrimination. But it's oversimplifying and a big blame to say that intersectionality is the reason why the progressive left in the US has ceased to function.

Recognising demands from trans groups is one thing under the umbrella of intersectionality, while allowing a movement to focus on one topic at a time is another. Intersectionality is not an all-encompassing tool, but it risks becoming a scapegoat when inclusivity doesn't work.

The example Bregman gives, which he assigns a lot of weight to, is when the US Supreme Court scrapped the right to abortion and the timing of NARAL's tweet. A question one can ask is if this example, this 'original goal', is as important for everyone involved in NARAL. It could or maybe should be, but considering and allowing different standpoints is important, even if we do not agree.

Bregman also seems to link intersectionality with purity and an uncompromising attitude. It sounds like his view of intersectionality is that every group being discriminated against must be incorporated into every effort. He asks: "What happens if the duty to declare your solidarity with anyone and everyone is just too much, stifling cooperation instead of facilitating it? And what if you then lose sight of your original goal?"

Taken together, these critiques demonstrate how intersectionality, once it travels outside academia, becomes entangled in political rhetoric, popular commentary, and ideological conflict. Public debates sometimes distort the concept — reducing it to caricature, treating it as a threat, or blaming it for wider fractures within progressive movements. As a result, intersectionality is frequently discussed not in terms of its analytical value but as a symbolic battleground in broader cultural conflicts. Yet these misinterpretations also underscore why examining intersectionality in practice is essential.

To move beyond the noise of public controversy, the next section turns to concrete examples from around the world where intersectional analysis has been used constructively — to illuminate structural inequalities, inform policy, and shape more inclusive strategies for social justice. These cases demonstrate that, despite its contested public life, intersectionality remains a powerful and necessary tool when applied with clarity, reflexivity, and attention to power.

4: Intersectionality as a useful approach

In this section, I intend to demonstrate that intersectionality is not only useful but essential across diverse contexts. I examine projects from South Africa, Scotland, Canada, UN Women, and Greenpeace to show how intersectional analysis can reveal overlapping systems of oppression and inform more inclusive, effective strategies for social justice — while also acknowledging the challenges each case encounters. I also revisit critiques of post–Hurricane Katrina analyses, which, as Rachel E. Luft argues, overlooked the intertwined effects of racism and sexism. Taken together, these examples highlight both the transformative potential of intersectionality and the practical obstacles that shape its implementation.

South Africa

Since intersectionality first emerged within legal feminist scholarship, I begin this section with an example from South Africa. In an article,[95] Ramalekana and Mokgoroane (2024) analyse how the South African Constitutional Court has incorporated intersectionality into its equality jurisprudence under Section 9 of the Constitution[96]. The authors argue that an intersectional lens enables the Court to assess whether a legal distinction serves a legitimate purpose — and, crucially, whether a law that appears justified on its face is irrational due to its disparate impact on multiply disadvantaged groups.

Although the Court has long accepted intersectionality, its precise doctrinal role within the key section 9 tests has not always been consistent. The article clarifies how intersectionality has shaped equality jurisprudence and how it should continue to guide the Court's approach across the distinct provisions of Section 9.

The Constitutional Court recognised intersectionality from its earliest equality case, *Brink v Kitshoff* (1996)[97], acknowledging that overlapping discrimination — particularly against Black women — intensifies structural harm. Intersectionality has since been treated as an important analytical tool for identifying disadvantage and advancing "a substantive rather than a formal conception of equality".[98] The text of Section 9(3) in Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on "one or more grounds,"[99] explicitly allows for recognition of intersecting harms.

Despite progress, intersectionality is not applied consistently. Scholarly debates continue regarding its precise doctrinal demands, and courts sometimes overlook intersectional harms. In the case *Mbana v Shepstone & Wylie* (2015)[100], for example, the Court's failure to consider race, gender, and socio-economic status obscured the discrimination experienced by Black women.

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[95] N. Ramalekana & L. Mokgoroane (2024): Intersectionality in the South African Constitution's Equality Clause, South African Journal on Human Rights, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02587203.2024.2440439

[96] Section 9 of the South African Constitution is the Equality Clause, guaranteeing everyone the right to equality, equal protection, and the benefit of the law, prohibiting unfair discrimination on grounds like race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc., and allowing for affirmative action to redress past disadvantages.

[97] The Constitutional Court of South Africa: : Case Number: CCT15/95 (Brink v Kitshoff NO) https://collections.concourt.org.za/handle/20.500.12144/1994 (accessed 2025-11-01)

[98] N. Ramalekana & L. Mokgoroane (2024): Intersectionality in the South African Constitution's Equality Clause, South African Journal on Human Rights, p.3 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02587203.2024.2440439

[99] The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, ISBN 978-0-621-39063-6 (1996) https://www.justice.gov.za/constitution/SAConstitution-web-eng.pdf (accessed 2025-11-02)

[100] The Constitutional Court of South Africa: Mbana v Shepstone & Wylie, Case Number: CCT85/14 https://collections.concourt.org.za/handle/20.500.12144/3791 (accessed 2025-11-01)

Although the Mbana case did not establish a new doctrinal test, it has become an important cautionary example in South African equality jurisprudence. The case demonstrates how the failure to engage with intersectional disadvantage[101] can produce an under-inclusive equality analysis and ultimately distort the Court's findings on discrimination.

In the Mbana case, the Constitutional Court assessed the claim in a formalistic manner, focusing narrowly on the legal rule at issue without accounting for the claimant's intersectional position as a Black, poor woman working as a domestic worker. By analysing each ground of discrimination in isolation — or by overlooking certain grounds entirely — the Court effectively obscured the compound nature of the disadvantage experienced. The authors argue that this "single axis" approach camouflaged the discrimination, resulting in an outcome that did not adequately recognise the structural realities shaping the claimant's vulnerability.

The Mbana case decision thus stands for a broader principle: equality analysis must attend to the interaction of multiple grounds of disadvantage, rather than treating them as discrete or mutually exclusive. The case illustrates how the absence of intersectional reasoning can lead courts to underestimate the severity of discrimination and to misinterpret the lived effects of ostensibly neutral legal rules.

In this sense, the Mbana case principle highlights the importance of intersectional methodology in constitutional equality adjudication[102]: without it, the jurisprudence risks reinforcing rather than dismantling entrenched patterns of racialised, gendered, and class-based inequality.

Scotland

Another interesting example comes from the Scottish Government's report *Using Intersectionality to Understand Structural Inequality in Scotland*[103], designed to help public sector analysts and policymakers apply intersectionality to equality data and service design. The report defines intersectionality as a framework for understanding how simultaneous membership in multiple social categories interacts with systems of power to produce structural inequality. Crucially, it emphasises that intersectionality is not a synonym for diversity or an additive list of disadvantages, but a tool for revealing the power relations that shape inequality.

In Scotland, intersectionality is increasingly referenced in policymaking, but often in ways that are diluted or inconsistent, according to the report. The concept has broadened from its original focus on race and gender to include all nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010[104], as well as socio-economic disadvantage. While well-intentioned, this expansion can weaken intersectionality's core emphasis on power and structural inequality. Research identifies five competing interpretations of the concept — from generic and pan-equality models to multi-strand approaches, "diversity within" categories, and work with specific

[101] N. Ramalekana & L. Mokgoroane (2024): Intersectionality in the South African Constitution's Equality Clause, South African Journal on Human Rights, p.18 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02587203.2024.2440439

[102] To adjudicate means to make an official decision about who is right (in a dispute)**:** to settle judicially. Merriam-Webster https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjudicate (accessed 2025-11-15)

[103] Scottish Government, Using Intersectionality to Understand Structural Inequality in Scotland: Evidence synthesis. (2022) https://www.gov.scot/publications/using-intersectionality-understand-structural-inequality-scotland-evidence-synthesis/ (accessed 2025-12-01)

[104] Ibid. Note 22, p.15: Under the Equality Act 2010, the nine protected characteristics are: age; disability; sex; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; and sexual orientation.

intersecting groups. These interpretations tend to individualise or oversimplify intersectionality, making it less effective at revealing the structural forces that shape inequality.

Efforts to strengthen intersectional practice highlight the need for participatory research with marginalised groups, improved access to participation, and analytical methods capable of capturing combined effects (including interaction terms, multilevel modelling, and enhanced cross-tabulation). However, progress is hampered by limited intersectional data, small sample sizes, and siloed policymaking processes that often dilute the concept's intent.

Despite these challenges, intersectional analysis in Scotland has yielded valuable insights, for example, into the intersecting factors shaping poverty, the racialised and occupational dynamics behind unequal COVID-19 risks, and the compounded discrimination faced by women in STEM who also experience other marginalisations. These findings demonstrate the practical value of intersectionality, even as its full potential in policymaking remains unrealised.

Overall, embedding intersectionality in Scottish policy requires moving beyond one-size-fits-all models toward approaches that can meaningfully map how social identities and structural power interact to produce distinct forms of advantage and disadvantage

Canada

The third example demonstrating the value of an intersectional approach comes from Canada, drawing on the open-access commentary "'Doing' or 'Using' Intersectionality? Opportunities and Challenges in Incorporating Intersectionality into Knowledge Translation Theory and Practice."[105] The article analyses a national, interdisciplinary health research project that attempted to integrate an intersectional lens into the field of knowledge translation (KT)[106] in healthcare. Rather than presenting a simple success story, the authors reflect on the tensions, resistance, and structural constraints that surfaced as they tried to embed intersectionality into KT theory and practice.

Their reflections highlight three central tensions. First, "discomfort with social justice".[107] Although social justice is foundational to intersectionality and central within women's and gender studies, some KT practitioners perceived explicit references to it as "politicizing" the work. In research cultures emphasising neutrality and avoiding bias, the very commitments that sustain intersectional analysis could be viewed as introducing bias.

Second, "disciplinary divides,"[108] created methodological and structural barriers. KT models often prioritise individual behaviour and rely on hierarchies of evidence that privilege quantitative methods. These approaches typically overlook structural determinants such as racism and sexism, marginalising the qualitative, theoretical, and context-driven insights

[105] Kelly et al. International Journal for Equity in Health (2021) "'Doing' or 'Using' Intersectionality? Opportunities and Challenges in Incorporating Intersectionality into Knowledge Translation Theory and Practice." https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01509-z (accessed 2025-12-02)
[106] S. E. Straus, J. Tetroe, I. Graham. Knowledge Translation, definition by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research: CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal) https://www.cmaj.ca/content/181/3-4/165 (accessed 2025-12-02)
[107] Kelly et al. International Journal for Equity in Health (2021) "'Doing' or 'Using' Intersectionality? Opportunities and Challenges in Incorporating Intersectionality into Knowledge Translation Theory and Practice." Abstract & p. 3. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01509-z (accessed 2025-12-02)
[108] Kelly et al. International Journal for Equity in Health (2021) "'Doing' or 'Using' Intersectionality? Opportunities and Challenges in Incorporating Intersectionality into Knowledge Translation Theory and Practice." Abstract & p. 3. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01509-z (accessed 2025-12-02)

central to intersectionality. As a result, key intersectional principles — attention to context, structural power, and lived experience — were at risk of being sidelined.

Third, the team navigated the tension between "meaningful inclusion versus tokenism".[109] Despite efforts to bring in diverse voices, they struggled to involve participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and deliberately refrained from incorporating Indigenous concepts because they had not met the ethical requirements of the OCAP principles[110]. Some citizen partners also questioned whether their contributions had real influence, illustrating how difficult it is to operationalise inclusion without slipping into tokenistic practice.

The authors additionally identify broader challenges: the lack of clear guidance on applying intersectionality in empirical health research, the difficulty of integrating intersectionality's radical critique of power within established research norms, and the widening gap between how intersectionality is theorised in gender studies and how it is often operationalised in health fields.

Despite these obstacles, the project shows that intersectionality, though demanding, can meaningfully transform health knowledge practices. The co-created tools that emerged offer a promising foundation for reshaping KT by centring lived experience, interrogating power, and fostering more equitable approaches to health research and practice.

UN Women

To illustrate how intersectionality can be operationalised in global policy practice, the UN Women Resource Guide and Toolkit[111] offer a prominent and influential example.

This Guide and Toolkit, developed in partnership with multiple UN agencies and civil society organisations, aims to strengthen the use of intersectionality in global policy and programming, a need made especially urgent by crises like COVID-19, which expose and deepen longstanding structural inequalities. The toolkit defines intersectionality as a way of analysing how identities, social relations, and power structures interact to shape distinct patterns of privilege, disadvantage, and exclusion.

Rather than relying on a simple "add and stir" model that treats different forms of discrimination as separate and cumulative, the guide presents intersectionality as a structural framework that reveals how overlapping systems of power create specific and often overlooked vulnerabilities.

The resource is built around eight "intersectionality enablers",[112] such as reflexivity, dignity, diverse knowledges, accountability, and participation, which serve as principles for embedding intersectional thinking into policy processes. It also outlines a practical three-step action

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[109] Kelly et al. International Journal for Equity in Health (2021) "'Doing' or 'Using' Intersectionality? Opportunities and Challenges in Incorporating Intersectionality into Knowledge Translation Theory and Practice." Abstract & p. 4. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-021-01509-z (accessed 2025-12-02).

[110] The First Nations' principles of OCAP® establish how First Nations' data and information will be collected, protected, used, or shared. OCAP: Ownership, Control, Access, Position. https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/ (accessed 2025-12-01)

[111] UN WOMEN: INTERSECTIONALITY RESOURCE GUIDE AND TOOLKIT An Intersectional Approach to Leave No One Behind. UN WOMEN, (2021) https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/01/intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit (2025-10-15)

[112] Ibid., Section 2.

framework: Analyse, Adapt, Assess,[113] designed to help practitioners, policymakers, and advocates apply intersectionality across development, humanitarian, and human rights work.

Crucially, the guide shows why intersectionality is indispensable for effective global policy: without it, programs may unintentionally reproduce the inequalities they seek to address. Intersectional analysis helps identify who is most affected by crises, why certain groups remain persistently excluded, and how policy choices can reinforce existing hierarchies. By foregrounding power relations and amplifying the voices of those furthest from justice, the toolkit supports the creation of more equitable, context-sensitive, and transformative interventions.

Ultimately, the guide aims to cultivate an intersectional mindset across global governance systems, enabling the pursuit of substantive — rather than merely formal — equality and advancing the central pledge of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: "to leave no one behind."[114]

Greenpeace

An intersectional approach is equally vital within activism because it reveals how systems of oppression — such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and homophobia — do not operate in isolation but mutually reinforce one another. Individuals situated at the crossroads of multiple historically marginalised identities often experience forms of discrimination that cannot be understood or addressed through single-issue frameworks. By centring the experiences of those most acutely affected, activists are better equipped to design strategies that are not only more effective but also more equitable and inclusive. This is important because activism that overlooks intersectionality risks reproducing the very inequalities it seeks to challenge. Intersectionality enables movements to expand beyond narrow diagnostic frames and cultivate more comprehensive and transformative visions of justice — ensuring that no group is rendered invisible or left behind.

This significance becomes clear in Greenpeace's efforts to promote environmental intersectionality,[115] which explicitly links environmental degradation to social inequality. Greenpeace recognises that climate change disproportionately harms communities already burdened by structural discrimination. Their activism highlights how environmental harm intersects with gender, sexuality, race, disability, and economic status: dismantling ableism within environmental advocacy; drawing attention to the heightened climate vulnerabilities faced by women and LGBTQ+ people; and exposing forms of environmental racism,[116] in which polluting industries and toxic sites are systematically located near underserved and racialised communities. Understanding these intersections is crucial because without such analysis, environmental policy can inadvertently perpetuate inequality—for example, by directing resources toward already privileged groups or failing to protect those most at risk.

Yet Greenpeace's work also demonstrates why intersectionality is complex but necessary. The organisation confronts significant structural barriers: entrenched political actors and corporate

[113] Ibid. p.7.
[114] UN WOMEN: INTERSECTIONALITY RESOURCE GUIDE AND TOOLKIT An Intersectional Approach to Leave No One Behind. UN WOMEN, (2021) Title, foreword, Introduction & p.9 https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/01/intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit (2025-10-15)
[115] Ata S. (2022) Greenpeace https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/intersectional-environmentalism-crosses-everything/ (accessed 2025-11-30)
[116] Ibid, under the sub-heading Racial Justice.

interests that prioritise profit over planetary and public health; climate change as a multiplier of existing injustices such as poverty and gender-based violence; and the enduring legacies of colonialism and so-called 'extractivist' economies[117], which produce deep and persistent power asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. These challenges underscore why intersectionality matters: without it, responses to the climate crisis risk remaining shallow, technocratic, and blind to the root causes of harm. Moreover, Greenpeace must navigate legal pressures from corporations and the difficulty of crafting policies that meaningfully address the overlapping social and environmental injustices experienced by marginalised communities.

In sum, intersectionality is vital in activism — and in environmental movements such as Greenpeace — because it provides the analytical tools necessary to expose hidden harms, to understand who is most vulnerable and why, and to design solutions that advance genuine, rather than selective, justice.

Hurricane Katrina

To conclude this section, I turn to an example in which intersectional analysis was strikingly absent: Rachel E. Luft's "Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years After Hurricane Katrina.[118]" Luft argues that much post-Katrina scholarship failed to apply an intersectional feminist framework capable of accounting for the intertwined effects of structural racism and sexism. To address this gap, she introduces the concept of *racialized disaster patriarchy,* a network of political, institutional, organizational, and cultural practices that converge before, during, and after a disaster to produce gendered and racialised harm. This model, she contends, is essential for understanding both the dynamics of the disaster and the forms of recovery and resistance that followed in New Orleans.

Although post-Katrina analyses rightly emphasized racial and economic inequality, this often came at the expense of feminist and intersectional perspectives. Luft attributes this omission to what she calls the "machinery of disaster patriarchy,"[119] long-standing tensions between feminist and racial justice frameworks within progressive scholarship and activism. Without a systemic, racialised understanding of patriarchy, disaster recovery efforts risk reproducing the very forms of gendered racial injustice they seek to address.

The predominance of race-only frameworks, Luft argues, produced a form of "racist sexism" that privileged certain bodies and viewpoints while rendering others invisible. Even influential accounts such as Naomi Klein's theory of "disaster capitalism,"[120] acknowledged racialized inequality but largely ignored gender, leaving the intersection of economic, racial, and gendered vulnerability under-examined. In activist spaces, this erasure was reinforced by what Luft terms

[117] Greenpeace Middle East and North Africa (2025) https://www.greenpeace.org/mena/en/beyond-extractivism-towards-a-feminist-and-just-economic-transition-in-morocco-and-egypt/ (accessed 2025-11-02) Link to the full report: https://www.greenpeace.org/static/planet4-mena-stateless/2025/02/ce97182f-beyond-extractivism_-towards-a-feminist-and-just-economic-transition-in-morocco-and-egypt-report-eng.pdf (accessed 2025-12-02)
[118] R. E. Luft, Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years After Hurricane Katrina. Feminist Formations. Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2016), pp. 1-26, The Johns Hopkins University Press, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44508123
[119] Ibid. p.3
[120] N. Klein, The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism (2007) Knopf Canada.

"disaster masculinity"[121]: a culture shaped by militarized rhetoric, the valorisation of physical labour, and the marginalization of emotional and care work.

This masculinised activism resulted in gender-neutral political narratives that obscured women's specific experiences. For example, the campaign to preserve public housing—where Black women made up 90 percent of leaseholders—was framed solely as a fight against "race and class cleansing," effacing women from the story altogether. Traditional organizational sexism was further compounded by an influx of well-intentioned white activists whose deference to men of colour often sidelined Black women's leadership and intersectional analyses.

Ultimately, Luft demonstrates that the absence of intersectional gender analysis in the discourse on Katrina was not a mere oversight but the product of entrenched racialized patriarchal structures. These dynamics shaped how the disaster was interpreted, how activism unfolded, and whose experiences were allowed to matter in the collective memory and political response.

5: Conclusion

The discussion surrounding the meaning and importance of intersectionality will continue. Yet, the examples presented confirm that an intersectional approach is not merely practical and worthwhile, but essential across multiple domains of inquiry. Intersectionality, originating in Black feminist thought and introduced as a concept by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a crucial framework for understanding how multiple, overlapping systems of oppression (such as racism and sexism) create distinct experiences of disadvantage for individuals. By analysing how social categories interact rather than viewing them in isolation, intersectionality reveals the complex, interdependent nature of inequality, thereby enabling the development of effective and inclusive strategies for social justice.

The utility of intersectionality has been demonstrated globally, influencing fields from legal jurisprudence in the South African Constitutional Court, where it illuminates the experiences and vulnerabilities of multiply disadvantaged groups, to public sector policymaking in Scotland, where it is used to analyse equality data and understand structural inequality. Furthermore, organizations such as UN Women and Greenpeace employ intersectional frameworks to address structural barriers in programming and to connect environmental issues to the oppression of vulnerable communities, challenging entrenched power asymmetries. The absence of this lens, as seen in the analysis of Hurricane Katrina, risks neglecting the combined impact of structural sexism and racism, allowing pre-existing racialized patriarchal structures to advance injustice.

However, the concept's success and global movement have brought ongoing challenges. Academically, debates persist over methodological complexity, critiques of additive models in favour of compound, interactive models, and the expansion of categories beyond the original race-class-gender framework to include dimensions such as sexuality and disability. Most critically, the concept faces the persistent tension of "whitening" and depoliticisation. This process often strips intersectionality of its foundational anti-Black feminist and anti-racist origins, obscuring its critical edge and structural focus on power relations. As both Kimberlé

[121] R. E. Luft, Racialized Disaster Patriarchy: An Intersectional Model for Understanding Disaster Ten Years After Hurricane Katrina. Feminist Formations. Vol. 28, No. 2 (Summer 2016), p. 2, The Johns Hopkins University Press, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44508123

Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins stress, effective social justice requires resisting this erasure and maintaining the focus on those who are multiply burdened.

Ultimately, intersectionality is understood not as a fixed concept but as a dynamic "analysis-in-progress". It is a way of thinking and analysing, an "analytic sensibility", that focuses on what the concept *does* in practice, rather than seeking a narrow, fixed definition of what it *is*. Despite misinterpretations in public discourse, ranging from strawman arguments to criticisms that it stifles activist coalitions, intersectionality remains crucial for its core purpose: an explicit commitment to ethical principles and rigorous methodological engagement to advance justice.

To grasp the full scope of intersectionality is to recognize that it is not a rigid blueprint but a continuous, living system for understanding power. If conventional analyses treat social injustice like individual, isolated islands, intersectionality acts as the complex system of underwater currents and tides that connects them all. This ensures that efforts to address inequality recognize the profound, mutual shaping of race, gender, class, and other identity axes as they flow through systems of advantage and domination. It is a necessary framework that is *always under construction*.

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