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What Is Intersectionality?

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In the 2010s *intersectionality* became the rallying cry of many left-wing activists fighting for social justice. The Oxford English Dictionary [added the word](#) in 2015, and Merriam-Webster [published a definition](#) two years later. The term skyrocketed in popularity, in part due to the [philosophy espoused by Women's March organizers](#) responding to U.S. President [Donald Trump's](#) 2017 inauguration. But what exactly does intersectionality mean, and who coined the term?

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Intersectionality first appeared in professor Kimberlé Crenshaw's [1989 paper](#) for the *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. Titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” the paper used legal and theoretical evidence to argue that, although Black women are “multiply-burdened” through their experiences as being both Black and women, society thinks of their discrimination as operating on a “single axis.” However, in Crenshaw’s view, the unique experience of Black women cannot be subsumed under general Black or women’s experiences. People who only experience one of these factors of discrimination, such as Black men and white women, may come to dominate societal views on “the Black experience” and “the women’s experience,” sidelining the experience of Black women in the process.

Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality found many supporters in academia. But, as Crenshaw [told a reporter for Vox](#) in 2019, “‘The thing that’s kind of ironic about intersectionality is that it had to leave town’—the world of the law—in order to get famous.” Indeed, the concept has since been expanded beyond legal and Black feminist applications to include queer identities, class differences, and the experiences of disabled people, among others. There is an ongoing debate about the benefits of this terminological expansion in [academic circles](#) and across [media organizations](#). Regardless of the direction of this debate, Crenshaw’s term has become integral to discussions about identity and culture.

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