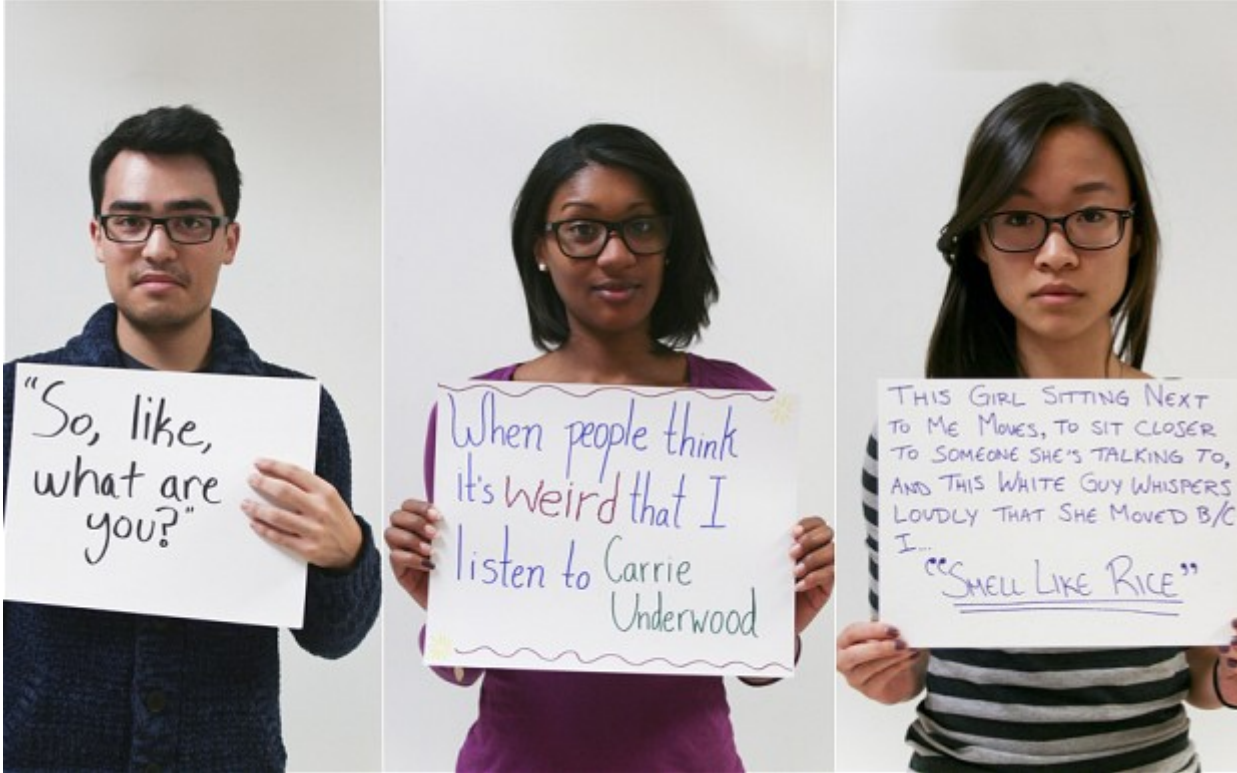


'Intersectional feminism'. What the hell is it? (And why you should care)

Today's feminist movement is said to be in danger of losing momentum unless it recognises that not every feminist is white, middle class, cis-gendered and able bodied. Cue intersectionality, writes Ava Vidal, who unpicks the latest f-buzzword that's causing controversy



Intersectional feminism recognises that certain groups of people have multi-layered facets in life that they have to deal with, such as racism and sexism - as this photography project from Kiyun showed last year Photo: Jezebel

By Ava Vidal

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Intersectionality is a term that was coined by American professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. The concept already existed but she put a name to it. The textbook definition states:

“*The view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.*”

In other words, certain groups of women have multi-layered facets in life that they have to deal with. There is no one-size-fits-all type of feminism. For example, I am a black woman and as a result I face both racism and sexism as I navigate around everyday life.

Even though the concept of intersectionality in feminism has been around for decades, it only seems to have made it into mainstream debate in the past year or so. And yet still so many people are confused

by what it means, or what it stands for.

It doesn't help that the message surrounding intersectional feminism has been somewhat confused in recent months. On the last BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour of 2013 black feminist Reni Eddo-Lodge was invited on to discuss the year in feminism. She began speaking about intersectionality and structural racism but was followed by Caroline Criado Perez who chose that moment to speak about abuse that she had received online by people attacking her under the guise, she claimed, of intersectionality.

I need to make it clear that Eddo-Lodge was not responsible for any of the abuse that she received, but the conversation was derailed nonetheless and the opportunity for her to address a large audience on a popular radio show was lost.

Caroline Criado Perez has since apologised.

Regardless, what really matters here is, are people any the wiser as to what intersectionality is and how it affects them? I'm keen to steer the conversation back to the subject of intersectionality in feminism and what it really means.

To me the concept is very simple. As a black feminist, I do not condone Chris Brown physically assaulting his (then) girlfriend Rhianna, but I will object if someone describes him as a 'black b*****d', as one white woman did to me. It does not mean that I support domestic violence as she then accused me of doing. It means that I, like the majority of black women, don't support racism.

The main thing 'intersectionality' is trying to do, I would say, is to point out that feminism which is overly white, middle class, cis-gendered and able-bodied represents just one type of view - and doesn't reflect on the experiences of all the multi-layered facets in life that women of all backgrounds face.

Roqayah Chamseddine is a feminist and writer that explains this further saying: "White feminism is extremely introverted refusing to acknowledge systematic hurdles facing women of colour (WOC) who are not visible. Our voices need amplifying because white feminism tokenise us and usurps our voices."

Until the mainstream feminist movement starts listening to the various groups of women within it, then it will continue to stagnate and not be able to move forward. The only result of this is that the movement will become fragmented and will continue to be less effective.

Racism in feminism

Whenever the subject of racism is brought up in feminism, it is no different to when it is brought up in any other forum. The usual platitudes are used and the accusation of 'being divisive' is often bandied around.

The phrase 'check your privilege' that accompanies many discussions about intersectionality is one example. On Twitter in early January, there was a hashtag started by a white feminist #reclaimingintersectionalityin2014 that caused many black feminists to question how she intended to reclaim something that had never been hers in the first place.

But it does prove that the concept truly has become mainstream if it is now at risk of being appropriated.

There is the mistaken belief that the only 'privilege' that you can have relates to skin colour. This is not the case. You can be privileged because of your class, educational background, religious background, the fact that you're able bodied or cis-gendered. A lot of black women can and do have privileges too.

One Twitter user said: "The fact that a major feminist concept has been ... pushed into the mainstream angers white feminists who refuse to acknowledge that they benefit from a white supremacist hetero-normative patriarchal system."

See this quote from famous black feminist and womanist Alice Walker, who said: "Part of the problem with Western feminists, I find, is that they take after their brothers and their fathers. And that's a real problem."

I remember having a discussion with a Muslim lady who said to me: "I hate feminism. There is no need for it and I don't want to have to carry heavy boxes just because you women want to fight to be equal to men."

What?! I had to point out a few things to her. First of all, feminism is not about having the right to carry heavy boxes. And as a 5 ft 11 black woman I can assure you that being seen as physically weak was not a problem that I have had to contend with in my adult life. In fact, on the few occasions that I have asked a man for help with a heavy object they have laughed at me and said things like "Come on love! Don't pretend that you can't manage that. A big strapping lass like you!"

As we spoke further it transpired that it was mainstream feminism that she had a problem with. That is, feminism that is overwhelmingly white, middle class, cis-gendered and able bodied. When voices within a movement are marginalised to the point where they don't even think that it is for them, the only result of this is that the movement is weakened becoming less effective. For example, I have heard mainstream feminists that are trying to ban the veil despite resistance from Muslim women say that they don't know their own minds, and wanting to wear the veil is just the result of indoctrination.

So what can we learn from all this? As we saw in heated radio discussions at the end of last year, it's easy to get bogged down in words, and he-said-she-said style conversations about what this means and what that means.

Intersectionality is still a relatively new term for the masses - and yet its message is one that surely any feminist can relate to: start listening to and including various groups of women, and their multi-layered

facets and experiences of life, and respect them, in the overall debate.

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