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POLS356

Critical Race Feminism Paper:

“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw

After analyzing Kimberle Williams Crenshaw’s written work, it is evident that she wants to emphasize the apparent discrepancy between racial and sex discrimination, especially when it comes to black women in modern society. When introducing her work, she clearly states how she wants to focus on the ‘black woman experience’ and how they are ‘theoretically erased’ in the discussions of feminism and discrimination. To make things clear throughout her research, she brings in Title VII case examples that demonstrate intersectionalities, such as *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* and *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter Inc.* While providing these case examples, she also focuses on several critical points in her writing, which include the antidiscrimination framework, feminist theory, and black feminism.

Before introducing the Title VII cases, one must understand this concept: Crenshaw focuses on these two cases because she wants the reader to understand that discrimination cases actively exclude black women. The framework surrounding discrimination fits the bill of other marginalized groups, such as white women and black men. Knowing this, Crenshaw introduces the crux of her research by mentioning *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, a Title VII case that focused on five black women bringing a suit against their employer, General Motors, accusing

the company of having a seniority system that actively discriminated against black women employees. The company provided evidence stating that they did not hire black women before 1964, and all of their black female employees who were hired after 1970 and lost their jobs were let go due to a recession, not because of their race. The court sided with GM, basing their statements that the “[P]laintiffs have failed’ to cite any decisions that have stated that black women are a special class to be protected from discrimination. The Court’s research has failed to disclose such a decision” (Crenshaw 141). Overall, the ruling in this case was that the court dismissed the sex discrimination complaint, mainly because the company provided evidence that they hired women—white women, that is, proving no sex discrimination. To make the situation worse, the court’s dismissal of this case and suggestion of consolidating this case with another discrimination case involving a black man proved Crenshaw’s point further. When it comes to discrimination against black women, it is different from the experiences of discrimination against white women and black men. Yes, white women and black men are part of a group of people who face a variety of forms of racial and sex discrimination. Still, according to this case and Crenshaw’s research, it is disproportionate. The use of this case in Crenshaw’s article is imperative to her research because it proves Crenshaw’s theory of excluding black women from the feminist theory, stating that “black women are protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups” (143). This statement stuck with me throughout the majority of this reading because it makes one understand the active discrimination black women have to face, especially when it comes down to the minute details.

The second case, *Moore v. Hughes Helicopter*, is another example of how the court blatantly ignores the words of black women in our society. *Moore* accused the company *Hughes Helicopter Inc.* of setting racial and sex discrimination precedents, with men being put at the

forefront for supervisory jobs and women being set apart from them. However, there was less of a discrepancy between black and white men and more of a problem between black and white *women*. The court stated that Moore's claims were not an accurate representation of discrimination as a female because she claimed to be discriminated against as a *black female*. The court also stated that this raised doubts about Moore's ability to represent Moore's white female colleagues. This statement alone solidifies the antidiscrimination framework and "the centrality of white female experiences in the conceptualization of gender discrimination" (Crenshaw 144). Talking about only the white female experience is actively contributing to the problem that the American legal system and society are currently facing. Crenshaw uses this case to demonstrate how black females are seen as less than in the eyes of the law, which is a problem no matter how one wants to frame it.

Another concept that Crenshaw points out is how black women are excluded from feminist theory. She does a good job of explaining this by stating this simple phrase: "Discrimination against a white female is thus the standard sex discrimination claim" (145). Using white women as the standard for how we describe gender discrimination creates a more hostile environment for those who try to say otherwise. As seen above, those who try to combat the white female discrimination perspective are vilified. Crenshaw mentions that black women's "claims are seen as hybrid; they sometimes cannot represent those who may have "pure" claims of sex discrimination" (145). The words 'hybrid' and 'pure' are also clearly stated here to separate black women from white women, making the words of black women seem less than. To put it simply, black women and white women are pitted against each other in the eyes of the government and are not set on equal ground. The whole idea of feminism goes in the trash because black women are constantly treated unfairly, and the phrasing above proves that. When I

read the words ‘pure’ next to white women and ‘hybrid’ next to black women, I was quite frankly appalled that our government and society still think this way when it comes to feminism. Isn’t it high time that we look at feminism for what it’s supposed to be: equality?

To push her credibility further, Crenshaw provides a personal anecdote demonstrating a further understanding of discrimination against black women. In her youth, Crenshaw mentions that she was invited to a prestigious white club after completing her first-year exams at Harvard College with a group of black male classmates. Once they arrived, she was told she would have to enter from the back door because she was the only black woman in attendance. At first, she wanted to make a scene or some kind of grand entrance, but she did not want to jeopardize the entrance of her companions, so she did not stand her ground and conformed. This personal anecdote from Crenshaw is essential to analyzing information because it provides an understanding that the reader did not have before. While one knows she has a solid understanding of the topic, it is clear she understands this concept at a more personal level because she faces this adversity every day.

After reading through this research, it is apparent that Crenshaw understands how the legal system constantly fails black women, and the system must change. I think Crenshaw’s perspective or so-called bias in the narrative should not be ignored when addressing bias. Rather than protect against bias in this article, I believe we needed to see Crenshaw’s personal anecdotes and see where she is coming from. Instead, the reader should embrace her perspective and open their minds to her information because she has a more personal understanding of the topic. Crenshaw’s collection of legal cases that present the discrimination against black women and provide personal anecdotes from times when she was excluded from events purely because she was a black woman is crucial to our understanding as individual scholars. How else are we, as a

collective, supposed to question what is wrong with our government and societal systems if someone doesn't point out what is wrong with our so-called fundamental beliefs?

This reading, from an intellectual standpoint, is quite an achievement. As a student, this taught me many things that I did not realize were wrong in the first place. It opened my eyes to discrimination that I did not know even existed, especially for black women. While I knew the system was somewhat misinformed, I did not realize just how bad it was for African American women today. To a serious scholar, this article is pivotal to creating new topics of conversation, such as how we can combat the antidiscrimination framework and anti-Black woman narrative that have been pushed into our society, government, and practices.

After reading Crenshaw's work, I can say it was thoroughly informative. It taught me a lot about the antidiscrimination framework and how we need to incorporate an analysis of race when it comes to recognizing discrimination against women, especially black women. As a South Asian Muslim woman, I have faced several different forms of discrimination, whether it be by the law or by society. When I was reading Crenshaw's analysis of the antidiscrimination framework and how Black women were actively ignored in legal cases, or when she was told to discretely enter from a backdoor so she would not be seen because she was a Black woman, I could empathize with her. I can understand the feeling of being actively excluded because of the racial background one comes from. While we will not have the same shared experiences because of our different racial backgrounds, I understand the hardship that comes with our shared gender discrimination, thanks to racial gender discrimination.

References

Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams, *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: Iss. 1, Article 8.