

**Disabled
Black
Lives
Matter**



Impact of Sexism on Black Disabled Women and Girls

By Michelle Daley, Alliance for Inclusive Education



Foreword

This resource was first delivered as a presentation by Michelle Daley (ALLFIE Director), to local Labour Party members in Islington, for International Women’s Day March 2021. It is based on discussions by ALLFIE’s [Disabled Black Lives Matter \(DBLM\)](#) pressure group, about the impact of sexism on Black Disabled women and girls in the UK.

“This resource is based on our human rights. We know that the entrance door for many individuals to education and learning is not open, or is layered with complications. It is from this context I will explore the experiences of Black Disabled women and girls, and how different identities determine our treatment, privileges and how we are privileged/disadvantaged within society.

I will begin by presenting some questions for discussion, alongside definitions of key terms, followed by accounts of two important Black Disabled Women in our history and intersectional struggle for equality - Mary Prince and Elizabeth Gertrude Suggs.

Finally, I will discuss the problems for Disabled Black women and girls in the UK today, and what we can do to help eradicate these”

Michelle Daley, Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE) Director

Discussion points

- 1. Sexism, Disablism, Racism, and Intersectionality: What do they mean to us?**
- 2. What are the problems Black Disabled Women and Girls in the UK experience?**
- 3. What is the Impact of Sexism for Black Disabled Women and Girls?**
- 4. What do we need to do to stop intersectional inequality and discrimination?**

CONTEXT | Human Rights Law

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) introduced the idea that people are entitled to certain basic rights, inherent to being human. Over the years, policy and law have developed to address the horrible history people have experienced. We know that even with equality policy and law in place, there remain horrific situations e.g. Disability Hate Crime and the brutal killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

1. What does Sexism, Disablism, Racism and Intersectionality mean?

It is important that we are clear about definitions when tackling inequalities and discrimination experienced by Black Disabled Women and Girls in order to help us to understand the intersectional relationship between sexism, disablism, racism and other forms of oppression.

To further our discussion it is important that we look at the definitions of Sexism, Disablism, Racism and Intersectionality. In summary:

i. Definitions

Sexism.

Sexism is any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice or behaviour based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline.

<https://rm.coe.int/prems-055519-gbr-2573-cmrec-2019-1-web-a5/168093e08c>

Disablism.

Disablism is discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people (people with impairments) are inferior to others. <https://www.demos.co.uk/files/disablism.pdf>

Racism.

Racism happens when others treat people negatively because of their skin colour. This also includes ‘people of colour’ as well as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and Jewish people can all face racism. The most recent example of institutional racism can be found in the [Stephen Lawrence report \(1999\)](#)

Intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a way to help us to understand how people can have more than one identity. For example a person can be Black, Disabled, Lesbian and a Woman.

ii. Intersectionality

The failure to think about the different experiences results in more oppression for some Disabled people. This also results in ‘intersectional erasure’ because the focus of the agenda is only on for example ‘disability as a homogenous experience’. **‘Intersectional erasure’** means to ignore individuals different identities.

‘Our struggle for liberation has significance only when the fundamental goal is about the liberation of all people’ This is one of the criticisms of British Black Disabled women, scholars, activists and campaigners, such as Millie Hill, [Nasa Begum](#) and ALLFIE’s newly formed [Disabled Black Lives Matter \(DBLM\)](#).

The traditional protected ground is defaulted for “white people” and the focus becomes on single characteristics. “This fails to protect people with intersectional identities (such as people like myself who are Black, Disabled and a Woman) rendering us to homogenous categories and invisible minority experiences.” (Michelle Daley)

It was in the 1980’s that Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black scholar and activist, introduced the term intersectionality.

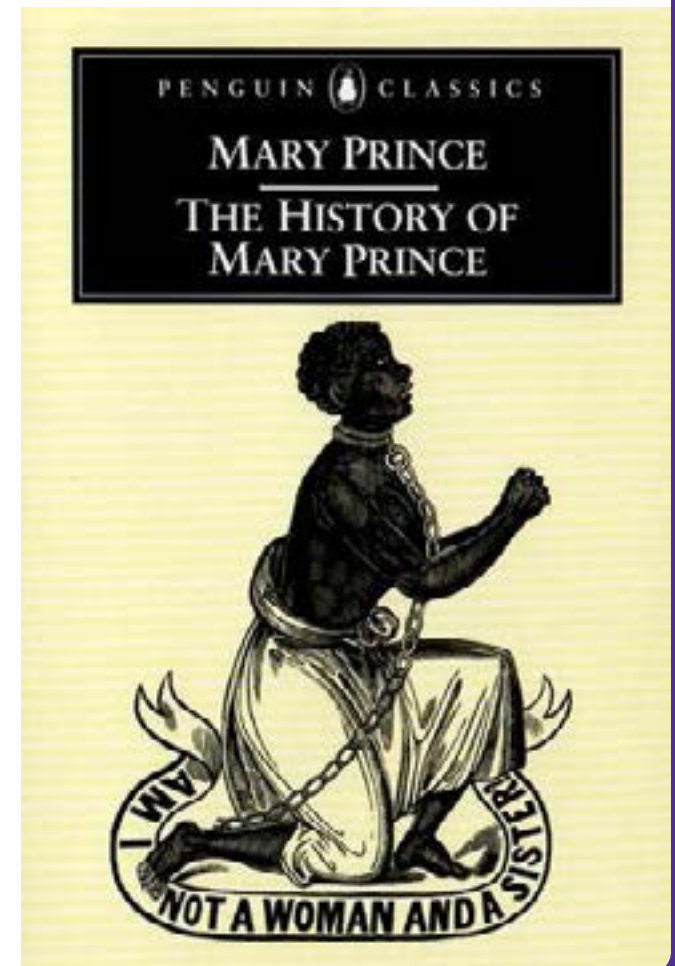
Kimberlé’s work helps us to better understand the cause and effect of intersectional discrimination when she discusses “Mutual exclusive groups/working”: This is when our identities are viewed as single and separate issues. This is a barrier because the focus of the agenda is on for example ‘disability’ only and does not think about other identities of Disabled people, for example race and gender and how this can affect our experiences as Disabled people. So it is clear that the problems for Black Disabled women and girls are rooted in structural powers which creates and perpetuates systems of privilege and disadvantage in our society.

Intersectionality: Mary Prince

Mary Prince (c. 1 October 1788 – after 1833) was born in Bermuda as an Enslaved African woman. Mary later became an abolitionist, and the first Black Disabled Woman to publish her autobiography in 1831 titled “The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave”. Mary acquired her impairment through the brutal conditions of African enslavement.

In her book she details about her life as an Enslaved Disabled African Woman:

“I fell ill again with the rheumatism, and was sick a long time; but whether sick or well, I had my work to do. ...I asked my master and mistress to let me buy my own freedom... but their hearts were hard- too hard to consent. ... and asked me who had put freedom into my head. “To be free is very sweet,” I said: but she took good care to keep me a slave.”



Mary Prince

Mary was brought to London in the 1820s by her owners. After years of mistreatment she successfully took a petition to Parliament for Enslaved African people to gain their freedom because Enslavement of African people had not formally ended on the plantations and continued to operate until 1833.

Mary's experience is the perfect example to tell us many things about the relationship between sexism, disablism, racism and classism.

When looking at Mary's court case for freedom we must always remember that members of the judiciary were all White people, higher class men from rich families (many of whom benefited from the enslavement of African people), sitting in judgment over the narrative of what they would have defined from an uneducated Black Disabled woman, and a slave to that.

There was a clear injustice and inequality for Mary. The judiciary was on the side of the hierarchy of power and privilege. The judge could not understand or relate to Mary's position as an Enslaved Disabled African Woman and her brutal and inhuman suffering of repeated harassment, rape and other forms of abuse. Mary dealt with sexism, racism, disablism, classism and other forms of oppression; this is a perfect example of intersectional discrimination.

Intersectionality: Eliza Suggs

Another example from Elizabeth Gertrude Suggs shows her determination to be respected as a Black Disabled women. She was born on 11 December 1876 and died 29 January 1908 at the age of 32.

“Elizabeth’s life interested me because I learnt that we shared the same impairment and what most engaged me about her story was how she refused to be exhibited as an oddity in circuses to earn money. Elizabeth was determined not to let others ostracise her from her community and wanted to engage in ordinary life experiences such access as an education and employment.” (Michelle Daley)

Elizabeth is quoted as saying, in 1906:

“Some wonder how I can be happy in my condition. I love to listen to the singing of the birds and of sweet music”



ELIZA SUGGS.

Eliza Suggs

Elizabeth was a 19th-century African Disabled Women and American author, who was born to former Enslaved African parents.

“She was born at the time of struggle and it would have been extremely hard for a Black Disabled girl to go to school and have access to formal education. I was encouraged how through mutual and collective support Elizabeth received a wheelchair from a family friend but also the pooling of a support circle helped her to attend mainstream school and later become an author.” (Michelle Daley)

Disabled women and girls are perceived as inadequate to fulfil either the economically productive roles traditionally considered appropriate for men. Disabled women are disproportionately disadvantaged in education, employment and are less likely than non-disabled women to get married. and the situation is worse for Black Disabled Women and girls.

Both Mary and Elizabeth did not benefit from human rights policies and laws but created a platform to help create change and remind us of the contributions that Black Disabled women and girls have played to human rights laws that we all benefit from today.

2. What are the problems for Black Disabled Women and Girls in the UK?

You may have a legitimate worry here and be asking how do these tools of definitions value and protect the specific human rights problems faced by Black Disabled women and girls?

Which leads onto our next question: **“What are the problems Black Disabled Women and girls in the UK experience?”**

In summary:

1. Governance and practice focus on **single issues**

2. Black Disabled Women and girls are rendered to **homogenous categories, perpetuating inequality**

3. Recognition of **intersectional discrimination is not widely understood**

4. Intersectional discrimination can be difficult to **define, therefore challenge**

5. Dependence on the **good will of people's self-consciousness to challenge intersectional discrimination**

6. Experiences of Black Disabled Women and girls are **left out/poorly represented**

3. What is the Impact of Sexism for Black Disabled Women and Girls?

We know the situation is bad for non-disabled white women and girls and worse for non-disabled Black Women and girls. The situation is increased for white Disabled Women and girls, and further amplified for Black Disabled Women and girls.

Basically, Women and girls in general are more likely to be confronted with sexism and other forms of intersectional discrimination and the situation will be increased for Black Disabled Women and girls. **In summary:**

1. Black Disabled Women and girls are underrepresented in all areas of life

2. Provisions, such as social and healthcare, reinforce negative stereotypes of Black Disabled Women and girls

3. Black Disabled Women and girls are less likely to be offered equal access/tools to training and education

4. Black Disabled Women are less likely to be offered the same relationship opportunities (e.g. marriage, flexible working)

5. No/poor data about Black Disabled Women and girls' experiences

4. What do we need to do to stop intersectional inequality and discrimination?

We really cannot afford to ignore or erase intersectionality and the legacies of discrimination towards any groups of people (such as Black Disabled Women and girls). Disabled Women and Girls are disadvantaged by our social injustices and inequalities. When we apply the lens of intersectional practice it helps us to recognise processes and practices about who gets represented, included and avoids tokenism.

To address the problem and protect peoples rights we need to look at, **in summary:**

1. Processes that create exclusion, marginalisation and separation

2. Practices that create privilege in terms of power:

- Who is in/out (relationships); Who benefits (structures)?
- Is language rooted in supporting oppressive practices?
- Do we have a culture of superiority?

3. Are our processes/practices supporting separation and segregation of Black Disabled Women and Girls?

Messaging: Intersectionality

When addressing the “Impact of Sexism for Black Disabled Women and Girls” it important to be clear about our messaging:

- **What message are you trying to communicate?**
- **What message do we want people to receive?**
- **Is our message clear and accessible?**

We must identify and represent the contributions made by Black Disabled Women and girls to our equality. Through the impetuous of BLM global protests, ALLFIE formed a Disabled Black Lives Matter Group and the two co-chairs are Black Disabled Young Women and I am pleased that the baton is being passed onto our next generation of Black Young Disabled Women.

In conclusion

“I have demonstrated the reasons why we must ensure that our work addresses ending sexism, disablism, racism, intersectional discrimination and looking at inequality as separate issues. We also need to ensure that we do not keep writing Disabled Black Women and girls out of our history which disadvantages all of us, renders us Black Disabled Women and girls to minority groups and leaves us without any positive representation to look too.” **Michelle Daley, ALLFIE Director**



“I have demonstrated how we can benefit from knowing about the powerful works of great Black Disabled Women activists of the likes of Mary Prince, Millie Hill and Nasa Begum in helping us to help us address the Impact of Sexism for Black Disabled Women and girls. I’ll close with a quote from one of my favourite Black Disabled Lesbian activist [Audrey Lorde](#).

She says that:

“...There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not lead single issue lives...”

Audre Lorde



Thank you and for more information about ALLFIE's work please check our website #ALLFIE

- ALLFIE is a unique voice! Formed in 1990 and last year we celebrated our 30th Birthday for more information about our 30th check out our website.
- ALLFIE is a national Disabled people's organisation focused on educating the wider public through: research, building capacity (information and resources) and campaigning for an inclusive society for inclusive education for all within mainstream education system and for it to be considered as a human right.
- We want the barriers removed that shut disabled people out of our mainstream education. We want UN CRDP (Article 24 on education) which is an international law applied in our our domestic laws so it will stops the practices and processes of inequality in education.
- This is a perfect introduction to set the context to our conversation which is to discuss the: "Impact of Sexism on Black Disabled Women and Girls".

Michelle Daley is the Director for the Alliance for Inclusive Education (ALLFIE).