

# **What does it mean for people to be equal?**

## Introduction

The term 'equality' denotes a state of equilibrium or sameness in reference to a comparison between two or more components. When evaluating what it means for people to be equal, one must take into account the socio-political status of the present-day society and assess whether or not all individuals have a fair opportunity to achieve their full potential as well as exercise their rights as citizens; for instance, the opportunity to be educated, receive a fair and equal wage, be able to vote, be able to express their creative and political opinions, etc. In order to achieve this state of equality, it is fundamental to assess the prevalence of its antithesis — being inequality, enabled through prejudice and discrimination. Though both signify inequality, prejudice refers to a pre-conceived notion whereas discrimination refers to direct action against a particular individual and/or community<sup>1</sup>. For a significant fraction of our society, the horror of discrimination is a day-to-day reality. This encompasses various aspects; for instance, gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, caste etc.

Throughout history, there has been an extensive amount of systematic prejudice wherein the judicial capacity of governments not only tolerated but also enabled discrimination against certain communities. Examples include The Apartheid in South Africa, the lack of voting rights for women prior to The Suffrage Movement, and the outlawing of same-sex marriage up until 2015. The acknowledgement, and consequently, the reduction of this discrimination is fundamental for the advancement of human rights. Through this essay, I aim to evaluate these three case studies of discrimination towards The LGBTQ Community, women, and The BIPOC Community (Black,

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<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z3vrq6f/revision/1#:~:text=Discrimination%20is%20making%20a%20distinction,is%20to%20do%20with%20action.>

Indigenous, and People of Colour) — so as to evaluate its impact on our present-day society. Moreover, I simultaneously aim to analyze how society progressed towards its current state and the solutions we need to develop further.

### Gender Bias: Women's Suffrage

The Women's Suffrage Movement was a campaign that advocated for women's voting rights throughout the mid-19th Century. The movement was widespread and sought to liberate women all over the globe; however, it took most prominence in Great Britain and The United States of America. These measures were necessary for women to gain representation in legislation and a voice as citizens.

The nineteenth amendment to the US constitution (1920) granted women the right to vote, which laid the foundation for a universal adult enfranchisement (Kapoor, 2019)<sup>2</sup>. This was a major milestone for The Women's Suffrage, especially taking into consideration that, at the time, very few countries had granted voting rights to women. This gradually changed over the mid-1900s wherein there was a global progression in voting rights equality for women. However, the legal and cultural restrictions persisted in limiting women's participation in election post the enfranchisement. It took much change to overcome this. Over time, through various other protests and waves of feminism wherein women's rights came to be regarded as human rights, the general idea of a universal adult franchise gained momentum. Overall, The Women's Suffrage Movement played a fundamental role in bringing about the reforms that reduced gender-based inequality — particularly, in relation to political involvement. It played an integral role in our present-day society, to the extent that in the

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<sup>2</sup> Kapoor, S. (2019, May 6). *Right to vote: Women have it and need to exercise it!* Sayfty. Retrieved June 21, 2022, from <https://sayfty.com/righttovote/#:~:text=It%20would%20make%20our%20society,experiences%20are%20different%20for%20men>

last five mid-term elections dating back to 1998, women voter turnouts were higher than those of men (Hartig, 2019)<sup>3</sup>.

The question that arises is whether or not the movement for women's rights is still required given the immense progress and redistribution of political power over the last few decades. Here, it is essential to note that one cannot claim that gender-based inequality no longer persists. A substantial percentage of women are still unaware of their rights and their advantages. Moreover, women have been marginalised, not just regarding voting rights, but also in the field of education, economics and employment, while also suffering prevailing issues such as rape, child abuse, and child marriage. Hence, women's political history is far broader than the ratification of constitutional amendments.

In order to advance gender equality, the UN proposed the correct demographic counting of the women population as the first step. It states, "Their very existence often goes undocumented". As the next few crucial steps, the continuous support of government and legislative bodies to support gender equality laws in all spheres such as equal opportunity, equal wage, maternity benefit, equal right to inheritance along with allowing more women to partake in important decision-making platforms at home, work and government policies is imperative. It is also important that society works at reducing and ending violence toward women and augmenting social security systems and policies to safeguard their dignity (Morse, 2020)<sup>4</sup>.

To conclude, accomplishing gender equality on all levels is ideal. Women attaining the right to vote and contributing to decisions will lead to a more inclusive and egalitarian society. A woman's opinion should be equally regarded as a man's for societal progress.

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<sup>3</sup>Hartig, Hannah. "In Year of Record Midterm Turnout, Women Continued to Vote at Higher Rates than Men." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 28 July 2020, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/03/in-year-of-record-midterm-turnout-women-continued-to-vote-at-higher-rates-than-men/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/03/in-year-of-record-midterm-turnout-women-continued-to-vote-at-higher-rates-than-men/).

<sup>4</sup> Morse, Michelle Milford. "Five Things World Leaders Can Do Right Now to Advance Gender Equality." *Unfoundation.org*, 19 Jan. 2020, [unfoundation.org/blog/post/five-things-world-leaders-can-do-right-now-to-advance-gender-equality/](http://unfoundation.org/blog/post/five-things-world-leaders-can-do-right-now-to-advance-gender-equality/).

## Discrimination On The Basis of Sexual Orientation: Same-Sex Marriage

The LGBTQ+ community encompasses a diversity of people with different sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, etc. Throughout history, the community has faced an extensive amount of homophobia and transphobia in the form of stigma, exclusion, intolerance, and discrimination in terms of education, occupation, healthcare, and general treatment from society. Many individuals that are a part of the community have faced an extensive amount of targeted violence— through abuse, assault and torture. This has often been enabled through systematic practices and laws that underlyingly — or sometimes outrightly — target these individuals by stripping them of their basic human rights; for instance, through outlawing consensual same-sex relations and expressing one's gender identity in a manner that doesn't conform to their sex assigned at birth. This consecutively leads to blackmail, extortion, stigma, and even death; for instance, Brunei and Yemen's Sharia Law outlines engaging in homosexuality to be a capital offence.

In a monumental move, same-sex marriage was finally legalized in the United States of America in 2015 (Chapell, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Before that, people in gay relationships were not only harassed but their relationship status was also considered illegal. In India, Article 377 stated that voluntary intercourse with a man/woman against the “order of nature” would be punished with imprisonment for life. This evidently portrays the prejudiced nature of the article wherein homosexuality was considered to be against the order of nature; however, in 2018, the Supreme Court made a welcome change towards the LGBTQ+ community wherein homosexuality was no longer considered a crime (Rautray, 2018)<sup>6</sup>. This allowed the members of the LGBTQ+ community to have an equal constitutional status to all the other heterosexual citizens. It also offered them the right to marry and adopt, hence allowing them the ability to raise a family together. Regardless, anyone belonging to

<sup>5</sup> ~~Chapell, Bill.~~ “Supreme Court Declares Same-Sex Marriage Legal in All 50 States.” *NPR*, NPR, 26 June 2015, [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/26/417717613/supreme-court-rules-all-states-must-allow-same-sex-marriages](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/26/417717613/supreme-court-rules-all-states-must-allow-same-sex-marriages).

<sup>6</sup> Rautray, Samanwaya. “Section 377 Verdict: Section 377: Sc Rewrites History, Homosexual Behaviour No Longer a Crime.” *The Economic Times*, 2018, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sc-delivers-historic-verdict-section-377-gone-being-gay-no-more-a-crime-in-india/articleshow/65696771.cms](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sc-delivers-historic-verdict-section-377-gone-being-gay-no-more-a-crime-in-india/articleshow/65696771.cms).

the LGBTQ+ community was excluded from acquiring a surrogate. The abolishment of Article 377 has had many positive impacts as it has led to more open dialogue regarding sexual orientation. Moreover, there is a surge in people identifying and openly accepting their sexuality and/or gender identity, which is an extremely progressive state of India's outlook towards homosexuality.

For the LGBTQ+ community to be considered as equal citizens in society, it is important to drive the increased need for societal acceptance through media advocacy and representation in a manner that depicts their struggle as well as portrays their humanity as the same as any heterosexual person's. Social acceptance can lead to more individuals seeking social transitioning, reduction of mental health disorders, and a raised self-esteem to live in society on equal footing (The Guardian, 2016)<sup>7</sup>. Laws that reduce need for surgical interventions for gender expression for procuring social documents, taking part in sports or having equal opportunities at work will possibly be replicated globally in the future as more countries and cultures increase acceptance. Meanwhile, discrimination needs to be challenged in courts to the highest degree. This, with the support of increased activism and movements is the key to achieving the ultimate equality and abolishing discrimination based on sexual orientation.

### Discrimination on The Basis of Race: Apartheid in South Africa

Racial equality advocates for treating people the same regardless of their race, while simultaneously acknowledging the injustices of the past and combatting its present-day influence. The Apartheid was a political system indoctrinated by the government in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. It legalised and mandated segregation based on racial grounds in a manner that outrightly discriminated against BIPOC citizens — particularly, in relation to Black people. This forced separation was supported by a cruel and fearsome state apparatus to punish any individuals and/or communities that failed to adhere to the segregation laws. Despite The Second World War highlighting the problem of racism, the government still passed The Population Registration Act

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<sup>7</sup>“ 13 Steps to Greater LGBT Equality.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 16 Feb. 2016, [www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/feb/16/13-steps-to-greater-lgbt-equality](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/feb/16/13-steps-to-greater-lgbt-equality).

(1950) which demanded that people should be registered according to their racial group, thus encouraging racial differences. Furthermore, The Group Areas Act of 1950 officially started the physical separation between racial groups, particularly in urban regions. Other discriminatory laws include The Prohibition of The Mixed Marriage Act (1949), The Separate Representation of Voters Act (1951) and The Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 (*A History of Apartheid in South Africa*)<sup>8</sup>. These culminated in the marginalisation of the BIPOC community in a manner that clearly segregated them from the White community.

The Apartheid was criticised not only by people directly affected by the discrimination but also by the entire global community. The African National Congress (ANC), along with other international bodies, fought toward liberation with the help of influential leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu (Britannica, 2021)<sup>9</sup>. They played an integral role in 1949 which eventually lead to the increased support for The Anti-Apartheid Movement started by the ANC (“Twentieth Century Freedom Struggles”)<sup>10</sup>. The 1990s saw definitive progress and success in the movement, which led to the formation of a Democratic South African Government in 2004. This could only be achieved after congress approved the comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act imposing tough US economic sanctions. This act has certainly changed the history of inequality in South Africa by criminalising segregation and integrating a more racially just system. Though The Apartheid has ended, many inequalities created as a by-product still exist in South Africa (Jones, 2019)<sup>11</sup>; for instance, the unequal distribution of income (Liebbrandt et al, 2012)<sup>12</sup>. Consistent effort is still required to overcome the historically deep-rooted discrimination and prejudice in society.

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<sup>8</sup> *A History of Apartheid in South Africa*. [www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa](http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-apartheid-south-africa).

<sup>9</sup>“African National Congress.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., [www.britannica.com/topic/African-National-Congress](http://www.britannica.com/topic/African-National-Congress).

<sup>10</sup>“Twentieth-Century Freedom Struggles.” *The Comparative Imagination*, publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft9p300976&chunk.id=d0e1870&toc.id=d0e1870&brand=ucpress.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, Rachel. “Apartheid Ended 29 Years Ago. How Has South Africa Changed for the Born-Free Generation?” *Culture*, National Geographic, 3 May 2021, [www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/how-south-africa-changed-since-apartheid-born-free-generation](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/how-south-africa-changed-since-apartheid-born-free-generation).

<sup>12</sup> Liebbrandt, Murray, et al. “Describing and Decomposing Post-Apartheid Income Inequality in South Africa.” *Taylor & Francis*, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0376835X.2012.645639?journalCode=cda20](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0376835X.2012.645639?journalCode=cda20).

The UN General Assembly proclaimed 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent (resolution 68/237) citing the need to strengthen national, regional, and international cooperation in relation to the allowing BIPOC individuals to be able to exercise full economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights as well as their full participation in all aspects of society. Moreover, The UN promotes the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action at national and regional levels (UN)<sup>13</sup>. On a national scale, government policies and legal framework need to ensure the recognition, development and equal right to justice for the people of African descent and protection against racial discrimination including xenophobia (UN)<sup>14</sup>. On a regional level, the importance of education of society regarding the historical discrimination, encouraging an unbiased perspective through dialogue and discussion and the responsibility of each individual in society to treat the BIPOC community as equal cannot be undermined.

### Conclusion

The concept of 'equality' is at the core of human rights and belief in the related morality is at the core of the human race. Prejudice and Discrimination prevalent in society historically or currently, in its entirety or in vestiges, threatens peaceful co-existence. It leads to regressive, intolerant and reactionary attributes in society and more importantly, to the loss of integrity of the moral conscience that differentiates humans from animals. It is therefore important to revisit history and the prevalent discriminations of the past era in order to review, analyze, learn, and apply remedial thoughts and actions towards building the ideal of an egalitarian society. Through this essay, I have revisited the past discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community, women and the BIPOC community to realize the impact of the past on the present. Though I conclude that current society is still influenced by past prejudices and we are many steps away from all individuals actually being

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<sup>13</sup>“ Durban Declaration and Programme of Action 20th Anniversary.” *United Nations*, United Nations, [www.un.org/en/durban-20-anniversary/way-forward](http://www.un.org/en/durban-20-anniversary/way-forward).

<sup>14</sup>“ Programme of Activities for the Implementation of the International Decade for People of African Descent.” *United Nations*, United Nations, [www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent/programme-activities](http://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent/programme-activities).

equal, I also strongly feel that reforms and change in a society like the brewing of evolution in the biosphere follow a gradual and consistent timeline.



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