

# **THE FUTURE OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL AND GLOBAL CHANGES.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers the position of minority rights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Particular attention is paid to rapid global and national changes and the growing shift to a human rights framework in developed countries, for achieving equality of opportunities, fairness and social justice. The paper questions whether this shift is premature and explores some of the difficulties this move might present for both developing countries and developed countries, especially in light of the renewed discrimination faced by Muslim minorities post 9/11. Drawing in the experiences of the UK, the pros and cons of the single human rights framework vs a multiple equality strand approach is discussed with a view to highlighting lessons that can be learned from the UK experience. The paper argues that despite national social, political and

cultural differences, the experiences of muslim minorities, post 9/11 is similar across the globe and that it is therefore essential that activists, politicians, academics and policy makers across the world unite in their quest for finding workable solutions to equal opportunities.

## **Introduction**

Fellow delegates and friends, it is indeed, an honour to be given the opportunity to participate in this conference. I would like to thank the organisers, especially Mr Navid Hamid for inviting me and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office for funding my visit, in particular Ruth Willis, whom I know put a lot of effort into organising this visit.

In this respect, I must stress that the UK government is keen to work in partnership with other countries to find workable solutions for problems that effect us all equally. We strongly believe that although our national contexts, societies and cultures and histories are different, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is more that unites us than that which separates us.

And therefore while we keep in mind our very many differences, we must also recognise the similarities of experiences and work together to find solutions to common problems. Despite our longstanding work in the area of equal opportunities, in Britain we do not claim to know everything, we have made mistakes, but we have also learned from these and in many respect, made much progress in certain areas of equality especially gender and ethnicity.

Take gender inequality for example, its is hard these days to imagine women being denied the vote yet, years ago, women in Britain were not able to do so. Similarly, prior to 1976, many in Britain felt it perfectly natural to discriminate on the grounds of ethnicity, colour and culture. Signs like “No Irish, No Dogs, No Blacks”, put up by landlords to restrict the entry of certain groups of people into certain housing districts were perfectly acceptable, as were signs like “no gypsy travellers” outside hotels and restaurants. These days in Britain, you can be prosecuted and sentenced for racial discrimination, thanks to the race Relations Act of 1976.

## **Contemporary Britain**

Over the years, Britain has seen the establishment of numerous legislation to promote good relations between its diverse groups and to eradicate discrimination, first in terms of Gender and Race (1975/1976) and then Disability. More recently, legislation was passed to protect other minorities, including groups defined by age, sexual preference and religion. The latter more because of the increasing discrimination of Muslim individuals and communities post 9/11.

British society these days is multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious. While in India, your diversity has been an integral feature of your society since Indian society has always been complex in terms of regional, local, religious, class and caste differences, in Britain, diversity and difference is seen in many quarters as a new phenomenon. It is seen as something that has come with colonialisation and immigration.

On the contrary, the reality is that Britain has always been a diverse society with similar cultural, ethnic, linguistic and

religious differences (Scots, Welsh, Irish, Anglo-saxon, Highlanders/lowlanders) While you have caste, we have class. While you have Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu, we have Gaelic, English and Welsh. The only difference is that you in India have always been aware of your differences while the British have only just discovered theirs, seeing it in some ways as a problem.

This discovery came to the fore when newer forms of differences marked by skin colour emerged during the 50s and 60s. While the liberal minded fought hard to address the discrimination faced by the newer minorities over the last 30 years - introducing legislation when goodwill failed, even they were not prepared for the most recent backlash against the Muslim Minorities, post 9/11. A group, which comprises people of all colours, histories, nationalities, but have a common factor – their religion.

This new form of discrimination is unique in that it is not necessarily related to the British Colonial past or domestic policies, but to global events. And since 9/11, we have realised that we need to seek answers and solutions both domestically and internationally. We recognise the need to

work with other countries, to learn from each other and support each other in protecting the rights of Muslim minorities.

We have recognised the need to review our past approach to equalities and diversities and despite our successes with strand specific approaches and different commissions and legal frameworks to protect different minority groups, we are now moving to a single human Rights Framework.

## **Why?**

I am not here to argue that this is the right and only way for the rest of the world, but for Britain, given our progress over 30 years, we feel the need to take a different approach, one which consolidates our work on equal opportunities and to build on it.

We have had 40 years of patch-work legislation - at least 116 separate legislation, 35 acts, 52 statutory instruments, 13 code of practices and 16 EC directives and recommendations. It lacks consistency, difficult for lay-people to understand. To interpret the law, there are 2500

pages of guidance. Previous commissions took approximately a quarter of a million calls annually, amidst confusion and conflict in interpretation.

### **Some thoughts in closing**

We need effective, simple legislation to guide employers, organisations and citizens on rights and responsibilities and effective monitoring of compliance and enforcement.

There should be a balance between the focus of local and global equality concerns and how all countries across the world could benefit from sharing ideas and resources etc.

There should be some thoughts on rethinking the discourse around equal opportunities in light of the Indian Constitution. How do we knit together human rights, the principles reflected in the constitution, international expectations on equality (re: India on the Global Stage) and domestic concerns. What do you think? - This will of course not be focused on telling India what to do but rather opening their eyes to the bigger picture and seeking solutions for inequality within and outward looking perspective. This

could be viewed as preparing its citizens for whom through business, education, employment are having to operate elsewhere in the world and are not prepared for how to deal with other countries perspectives on equality, including different views on minority religious groups and gender. I would also like to point out that the 'persecution' of muslim minorities is universal post 9/11 so there are lots of lessons to learn from one another in terms of managing conflicts and protecting minorities.

I thank you.