



Prejudice and discrimination: Barriers to social inclusion

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Societies continue to make distinctions based on ethnicity, race, sex or gender and other characteristics that should have no bearing on people's achievements or on their well-being. The Report on the World Social Situation 2016 argued that discrimination is one of the key drivers of social exclusion (United Nations, 2016).

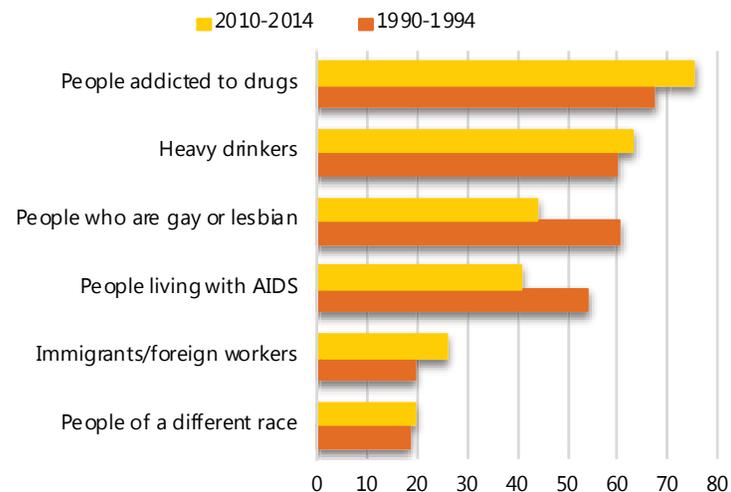
Discrimination remains a fundamental problem in the world today. Based on existing literature, the Report found that discriminatory norms and behaviours remain widespread and continue to drive social exclusion. Yet while formal institutional barriers faced by marginalized groups are easy to detect, informal barriers are frequently more subtle, making measuring discrimination difficult.

Measuring discrimination and prejudice

One way to measure discrimination is to ask people if they felt they've been treated unfairly due to their identity. Members of racial or ethnic minority groups in many countries feel that they face discrimination in day-to-day encounters. In a 2008 survey covering 23,500 immigrants and members of ethnic minorities across the European Union, one in four respondents reported feeling discriminated against in the previous 12 months on at least two grounds: ethnic or immigrant origin, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief or "other" reasons.

This data measures the views of those subject to discrimination, but doesn't measure the perceptions of those who may be prejudiced against certain groups. The World Values Surveys assess prejudicial attitudes through questions on whether respondents would object to having certain groups of people as neighbours as a measure of social distance between groups. Figure 1 shows objection is strongest against potential neighbours who use alcohol and illicit drugs, are living with HIV, or who identify as gay or lesbian. It is however prejudice against migrants that increased the most from 1990-1994 to 2010-2014.

Figure 1. Percentage of survey respondents who objected to having each of the groups shown as neighbours, selected countries.



Source: United Nations (2016), figure IV.2.

Attitudes towards migrants often become more negative in periods of economic insecurity or following large waves of immigration. The misperceptions that most often lead to negative attitudes include that migrants take away jobs from natives or they commit illegal acts, among others. That said, country context is the most important determinant of prejudicial attitudes: a country's institutions, history, and values are better predictors of tolerance and respect of others than an individual's level of education or employment.

How does discrimination impact social inclusion?

Discrimination affects people's opportunities, their well-being, and their sense of agency. Persistent exposure to discrimination can lead individuals to internalize the prejudice or stigma that is directed against them, manifesting in shame, low self-esteem, fear and stress, as well as poor health. A survey regarding HIV-related stigma and discrimination among people living with HIV in Asia and the Pacific, for example, found that half to three-quarters of respondents felt either shame, guilt and/or low self-esteem.

Discrimination is also correlated with negative physical and mental health effects. Discrimination has, for instance, been associated with self-reported poor health, psychological distress, anxiety, depression, hypertension as well as potential disease risk factors, such as obesity and substance abuse. The perception of discrimination increases the likelihood of participating in unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking and overeating, and reduces behaviours that foster good health, such as disease screening and management.

Discriminatory social norms also affect people's agency. Gender norms that attribute submissive qualities to women and assign them domestic roles continue to influence women's sense of agency and their willingness to exercise it, for instance. Although values evolve, findings from a field study in 20 countries would suggest that gender norms have not changed drastically over time or across cohorts, but rather tend to evolve slowly.

Conclusions

Prejudice and discrimination are often deeply entrenched and can limit the impact of laws, services and income for those groups that experience discrimination. Yet national institutions, both formal and informal, play a large role in determining and changing attitudes towards specific social groups and on overall levels of tolerance. While discrimination is decried around the globe and legal obligations and guidelines exist to fight it, much work remains to be done to achieve the goal of a world free of discrimination and prejudice.

Reference:

United Nations (2016). Report on the World Social Situation 2016. Leaving no one behind: the Imperative of Inclusive Development. Sales No E.16.IV.1. Available at: <http://bit.ly/RWSS2016>.

The Social Development Brief series is issued by the Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). This brief was written by Maren Jiménez under the supervision of Wenyan Yang. Contact jimenezm@un.org for more information. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations. The Report on the World Social Situation 2016 is available at: <http://bit.ly/RWSS2016>.