

Anti-Discrimination: Lived Experience and Lessons Learned

Good evening everyone. Thank you to the organisers of tonight's event and to my fellow speakers. I'm particularly grateful to Representative Park, whose leadership and determination on this crucial issue has been inspiring. I hope that he has found it energising to step away for an evening from what looks like a long and exhausting election campaign.

It's a pleasure to be here to talk about the challenges of discrimination and to share the impact of the UK's Equality Act.

As we sit here in this beautiful ballroom, in this luxurious hotel, in the centre of one of the world's safest and most dynamic cities, you might be forgiven for asking yourself: why are we bothering with this? Or as a CEO of a big company recently remarked: why is this even important when Korea has so few minorities?

I hope by the end of this short speech, I have helped to explain why this really matters. But to do this, I want us to move beyond the words in a piece of legislation to understand how discrimination affects real people's lives.

To illustrate this, I want to share with you my personal experience of discrimination and hate.

I am the son of a political refugee and an economic migrant. My mother was raised in Uganda, in East Africa. In the early 1970s, she and other Ugandan Asians were expelled from the country by Idi Amin's forces. In my mum's case, soldiers came to her house, put a gun against her head, demanded all of the family's valuables, and ordered the family to leave in a few days.

The British government, as the former colonial power, agreed to provide refuge for the family.

Life for non-white migrants in the UK in the 1970s was tough. My parents were mimicked, harassed, and racially abused. Many landlords refused to take them in. They lived in fear.

But alongside these episodes, my parents also found a compassionate country recovering from its own economic trials after the Second World War. They found people who were willing to embrace their differences, were curious about their culture, and keen to accept them as part of the community.

Of course, the issue of racial discrimination didn't end in the 1960s and 70s. It was there during my own upbringing in London. I can distinctly remember being racially abused for the first time. The feeling never leaves you. Even now it sends shivers down my spine. I remember when my father took me to watch England play football when right-wing nationalism and hooligan culture was rife. My father urged me to be as quiet and as inconspicuous as possible. I was terrified.

I wanted to tell you about these experiences because I think it's important that when we talk about discrimination and hate, we understand people's lived experience. No society is immune from these issues. But in some societies it is hidden better than in others.

Even in Korea, I have been surprised and disappointed by the occasional acts of intolerance. I saw how the LGBT+ community was targeted during the first Covid wave and how ethnic minorities have been ostracised by mainstream society.

After Rep Jang Hye-young and I did an interview for KBS on anti-discrimination I was shocked at the number of homophobic comments that were posted online. And more recently, I have been disturbed by the growing anti-feminist movement amongst young men. It was deeply saddening to hear the outcome of Dawoom's survey of LGBT+ issues in Korea. The percentage of LGBT+ who have attempted suicide is almost 16 times higher than the majority.

So, going back to the UK.

First a bit of honesty. As recently as 1967, people like the war hero Alan Turing were prosecuted for homosexual acts between consenting adults. As recently as 1968 it was legal to refuse housing, employment or public services to people because of their ethnic background. And as recently as 1975 it was legal to pay women less than men for exactly the same work.

And even in my own profession, diplomacy, it wasn't until 1987 that the UK posted a married, female ambassador overseas.

Discrimination has been a long-standing challenge for the UK. And despite the progress that we've made, it remains a work in progress.

So how did the UK's Equality Act in 2010 come about?

Race provides quite a useful case study. Following the end of the Second World War, the UK encouraged migration from across the Commonwealth. During the 1960s and 70s, the UK Government introduced race relations legislation in order to protect minority groups in the UK population, banning racial discrimination and the promotion of racial hatred. But this didn't solve the problems of race or other forms of discrimination.

The growing demand for a change to UK laws for the better protection of our citizens led to the introduction of the UK's Equality Act. The Equality Act became law on 1 October 2010, after completing a parliamentary process of approximately eighteen months.

The Equality Act 2010 consolidated over 160 pieces of legislation that formed the basis of anti-discrimination law in Great Britain.

The Act protects people against discrimination, harassment or victimisation in employment, and as users of private and public services based on nine protected characteristics

It is not a perfect form of legislation but it provides a framework for

recording all reports of discrimination, harassment and victimisation and it holds public bodies accountable for ensuring that their decisions and policies consider all people who come under its protection. Infringements of this legislation can be prosecuted under civil law.

Legal protections are only one step, though a very important one, in reducing discrimination and hate in society. It's really important that the government, civil society, and minority groups work closely together to acknowledge that everyone has a role to play in society; raise awareness of issues and tackle them at grassroots level; and to ensure that all the population are respected and protected from discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

One of the common complaints that I've heard from people who oppose anti-discrimination legislation in Korea is that these issues don't exist or are blown out of proportion. There are no structural issues. These issues do not affect productivity.

I am here to tell you that the evidence suggests the opposite. An equal and equitable society is far more productive. Let me give you some examples.

McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) finds that if women were to participate in the economy identically to men, they could add as much as \$28 trillion or 26 percent to annual global GDP in 2025. This is roughly the combined size of the economies of the United States and China today. McKinsey also found that companies with more gender-diverse executive teams are more likely to outperform median profitability in their national industry.

OECD estimates that on average a 50% reduction in the gender gap in labour force participation would lead to an additional gain in GDP of about 6% by 2030, with a further 6% gain (12% in total) if complete convergence occurred.

Analysis of 132 countries between 1997-2015 finds that an additional point on the 8-point GILRHO scale of legal rights for LGBT persons is associated with an increase in real GDP per capita of approximately \$2000.

The global response to the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority groups has reminded us of the challenges that all societies continue to face.

The war against prejudice, discrimination and hate is far from over.

It is important that we can share our experience and best practice to learn from each other, tackle these issues together and support our governments and society in introducing legislation that not only protects citizens from discrimination, harassment, and victimisation but recognises that everyone has a role to play in a secure and stable society.

I want to end this speech going back to where I started. When I joined the British Foreign Office, many members of my family questioned my decision. They asked: how could you work for these people? Do you not remember what they did, referring to Britain's colonial history.

My answer then is the same as it is now. It is important that we acknowledge the mistakes of our past and educate the next generation.

But the Britain I see now is one that embraces its diversity and recognises it as a strength. It's by no means perfect – the Black community remains marginalised – but our progress is a real source of pride.

I would not be standing before you giving this speech had it not been for the progress that we've made and the legislation that underpins it.

Thank you.