

What is Social Justice and How Do We Create a Socially Just Society?

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Social justice is the idea that society should recognize the inherent dignity and worth of all people, and should therefore work towards protecting a person's cultural, social and economic rights. This means that people should have access to a number of things, such as: an affordable education, access to job opportunities, a right to housing, the right to an adequate standard of living, food security, the right to safety, the right to healthcare, the right to participate in one's culture, and the right to benefit from science and technology. I would also argue that social justice should extend to include environmental rights, because the destruction of our environment disproportionately impacts poorer communities by destroying traditional ways of living (Kudloo, 2016). Essentially, there are many rights that need protection in a socially just community, but at the heart of this movement is the notion that all people have inherent worth and deserve to thrive.

Canadian society has a very long history of discrimination towards people based on their race or ethnicity, their gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, whether they are able-bodied, their socioeconomic status, or their religious background (McIntosh, 2003). Canada's foundation, structure and culture was created in such a way, that we continue to see huge inequalities between privileged groups (such as white, able-bodied, cis-men) and those excluded from that category. For example, Indigenous communities in Canada face a number of crises' that can be linked back to Canada's treatment of its First Peoples. Presently, Indigenous people face higher rates of incarceration, higher rates of poverty, higher substance usage, higher rates of chronic illnesses, and higher suicide rates than other communities (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012). This disparity can be linked back to Canada's treatment of Indigenous peoples, which includes outlawing their cultural practices, separating families through the use of residential schools and The Sixties Scoop, the use of "Indian Hospitals", the reserve system, as well as everyday racism (Blackstock, 2009).

In order to achieve a more socially just nation, it is important that we acknowledge injustices exist, and then listen to those excluded from privileges in Canada, and then work to improve their status. We do this by changing the ways that institutions (such as schools, businesses, the legal system, or government) operate and impact the lives of marginalized people (O'Brien, 2011). In the case of Indigenous Peoples, it is important that settlers acknowledge their colonial history, and the privileges they experience as a result of this, and thereafter change the institutions that have kept these injustices in place. Simultaneously, it is important that we listen to how marginalized people feel we should improve the situation. First Nations communities have indicated that social justice is improved when Indigenous Peoples are given the right to self-govern (Blackstock, 2009). For example, research indicates that suicide rates amongst Indigenous youth, is lower in Indigenous communities that have significant involvement with decision-making around child welfare, education, and health (Blackstock, 2009). To summarize, it is important that people with privilege and resources, become aware of their own privileges and then work alongside those facing discrimination.

Historically there have also been many examples where groups of people have worked together to change Canadian law in a progressive way. For example, efforts made by Canada's Women's Movement and the Labour Movement in the 1970's created legislation that prevented employers from firing or demoting a woman if she became pregnant. This discriminatory practice became known to lawmakers, because impacted groups (women) and their allies (the Labour Movement) created enough resistance to create that change. This is a good example of what can happen, if people collaborate to enact social change. If we acknowledge and address other areas where the law is not set up to protect the inherent rights and dignities of people, then as a society, we can work towards creating more social justice.

Social justice is also ensuring that communities have built-in safety nets. Safety nets, such as employment insurance, social assistance, universal healthcare, or social housing, allow all people to have access to services that they need to live and thrive (O'Brien, 2011). I feel that one way that our safety net can be improved, is by providing more opportunities for marginalized groups to access higher education. Higher education can allow people more socioeconomic mobility, by allowing for better employment and networking possibilities. Additionally, supporting marginalized groups to access higher education, can result in these groups feeling empowered to organize, as well as learning about ways to resist discriminatory practices.

When we give marginalized groups the space to voice the unjust experiences they face, we force those that are not impacted by that discrimination to acknowledge an injustice in their community. In closing, I would also like to acknowledge that when you are a member of the privileged group, it is important to not react negatively to the experiences others are sharing. Rather, it is better to sit with that discomfort and to use empathy towards those that are experiencing the injustice. The #metoo movement, which is the social movement geared towards ending violence against women, is a good example of why it is important to not react impulsively when others share their experiences of discrimination. Many women have recently come together to share their experiences with sexual violence and the social shame they faced when they came forward. #Metoo has driven many people to acknowledge the harmful myths around victims of sexual violence, and to acknowledge rape culture in our communities. #Metoo is a prime example of how important it is that we allow survivors the space to share their stories, and for others to acknowledge their painful experiences without responding impulsively. This movement, consisting of those victimized by rape and their allies, has forced society to shift its

perspective around gendered violence, and in essence, it has created an environment for social change.

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