

Righting Wrongs

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Sixty years after the universal declaration of human rights was adopted by the UN, attitudes, at least, have change dramatically

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After a century that saw two world wars, the Holocaust, Stalin's gulag, the killing fields of Cambodia, and more recent atrocities in Rwanda and now Darfur, the belief that we are progressing morally has become difficult to defend. Yet there is more to the question than some extreme cases of moral breakdown.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the UN general assembly's adoption of the universal declaration of human rights. In response to the crimes committed during the second world war, the declaration sought to establish the principle that everyone is entitled to the same basic rights, irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, or other status. So, perhaps we can judge moral progress by asking how well we have done in combating racism and sexism.

Assessing the extent to which racism and sexism have actually been reduced is a daunting task. Nevertheless, recent polls by WorldPublicOpinion.org shed some indirect light on this question.

The polls, involving nearly 15,000 respondents, were conducted in 16 countries, representing 58% of the world's population: Azerbaijan, China, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Palestine, Russia, South Korea, Turkey, the UK, Ukraine, and the US. In 11 of these countries, most people believe that, over their lifetimes, people of different races and ethnicities have come to be treated [more equally](#).

On average, 59% say this, with only 19% thinking that people are treated less equally, and 20% saying that there has been no change. People in the US, Indonesia, China, Iran, and the UK are particularly likely to perceive greater equality. Palestinians are the only people of whom a majority sees less equality for people of different racial or ethnic groups, although opinion is relatively evenly divided in Nigeria, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Russia.

An even stronger overall majority, 71%, regards [women](#) as having made progress towards equality, although once again, Palestine is an exception, this time joined by Nigeria. Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan again have significant minorities saying that women are now treated less equally than they once were. In India, although only 53% say that women have gained greater equality, an additional 14% say that women now have more rights than men! (Surprising in a country where foetuses are sometimes aborted because prenatal testing has shown them not to be male.)

Overall, it seems likely that these opinions reflect real changes, and thus are signs of moral progress toward a world in which people are not denied rights on the basis of race, ethnicity, or sex. That view is backed up by the polls' most striking results: very widespread rejection of inequality based on race, ethnicity, or sex. On average, 90% of those asked said that equal treatment for people of different races or ethnic origins is important, and in no country were more than 13% of respondents prepared to say that equal treatment is not important.

When asked about equal rights for women, support was almost as strong, with an average of 86% rating it important. Significantly, these majorities existed in Muslim countries as well. In Egypt, for example, 97% said that racial and ethnic equality is important, and 90% said that equality for women is important. In Iran, the figures were 82% and 78%, respectively.

Compared to just a decade before the universal declaration, this represents a significant change in people's views. Equal rights for women - not simply suffrage, but also working outside the home or living independently - was still a radical idea in many countries. Openly racist ideas prevailed in Germany and the southern US, and much of the world's population lived in colonies ruled by European powers. Today, despite what happened in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia - and appeared to be on the verge of happening after the recent disputed election in Kenya - no country openly accepts racist doctrines.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about equal rights for women. In Saudi Arabia, women are not even permitted to drive a car, let alone vote. In many other countries, too, whatever people may say about gender equality, the reality is that women are far from having equal rights.

This may mean that the surveys I have quoted indicate not widespread equality, but widespread hypocrisy. Nevertheless, hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, and the fact that racists and sexists must pay this tribute is an indication of some moral progress.

Words do have consequences, and what one generation says but does not really believe, the next generation may believe, and even act upon. Public acceptance of ideas is itself progress of a kind, but what really matters is that it provides leverage that can be used to bring about more concrete progress. For that reason, we should greet the poll results positively, and resolve to close the gaps that still exist between rhetoric and reality.

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