

Geneva International Centre *for* Justice
(GICJ)

International Day for Tolerance

16 November



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Introduction

On the 16th November each year, the *International Day of Tolerance* is celebrated to educate people about the need for tolerance in society and to help them understand the negative effects of intolerance. The day is meant to promote mutual acceptance and understanding, both of and among different communities and groups. It is a time for people to learn about respecting and recognizing the rights and beliefs of others, as well as a time of reflection and debate on the negative impact of intolerance.

In 1996, the UN General Assembly invited for the first time Member States to observe the International Day for Tolerance on 16 November, with activities directed towards both educational establishments and the wider public (resolution 51/95). This action came in the wake of the United Nations Year for Tolerance, 1995, proclaimed by the General Assembly at the initiative of UNESCO in 1993 (resolution 48/126). Since then, to mark this day, every two years UNESCO awards a prize to any institution, organization or person promoting in a particularly meritorious and effective manner the spirit of tolerance and non-violence through activities in the scientific, cultural, artistic or communication field.

The commitment of strengthening tolerance by fostering mutual understanding among cultures and peoples is an imperative that lies at the core of the United Nations Charter as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is more important than ever in this era of rising extremism and widening conflicts¹.

Since 1996, every 16 November live discussions and debates take place across the world, promoting tolerance and sensitizing public awareness about the various forms of intolerance that negatively impact our societies. Activists and NGOs use this day to speak out on specific human rights violations, including those with regard to hate crimes and discrimination against minorities. Companies and firms organize special training programs, talks and events, or disseminate messages from workplace leaders about the importance of tolerance.

The United Nations Commitment

UN Declaration of Principles on Tolerance

On 16 November 1995, the UNESCO member states adopted the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance and Follow-up Plan of Action for the year, recognizing the *International Day for Tolerance* as a main component of such a Declaration.

In the UNESCO's 1995 Declaration of Principles, tolerance is defined as "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human"². In addition to be a moral duty, tolerance is also a political and legal

¹ United Nations, *International Day for Tolerance 16 November*, 2009, <https://www.un.org/en/events/toleranceday/>

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *International Day for Tolerance*, 2018, <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/toleranceday>

requirement, involving the rejection of dogmatism and the acceptance of the fact that human beings, beyond their physical, situational, linguistic or behavioural differences, have the right to live peacefully without changing who they are, with no views to be imposed on others. It follows that tolerance and human rights should be seen as closely inter-linked, since a more tolerant society has greater respect for the human rights of all its members.

The United Nations published the Declaration of Principles to offer their views on what tolerance is and how it can be best upheld and protected in society. Specifically, the document listed six measures needed to ensure that tolerance is effectively promoted:

- *That the **meaning** of tolerance is clear.*
As outlined above, the declaration claimed the definition of tolerance to be 'respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression, and ways of being human'³. This necessitates an active attitude of acceptance towards others, accepting the natural diversity of the world population and allowing different communities to live peacefully as they are.
- *That action is taken on a **state level**.*
Tolerance at the state level requires legislation to be just and impartial, to ensure that opportunities are available to each person without discrimination, and that no communities are excluded or marginalized.
- *That the **social dimensions** of tolerance are promoted.*
This suggests that action should be taken also on the social – such as at the family and community levels, in schools and universities, in the media and in different social groups. It also necessitates that particular attention should be paid to vulnerable groups to ensure that they have suitable societal provisions and protections, and studies and networking should be undertaken to enable the international community to respond to this challenge, such as the analysis of the root causes of social inequality.
- *That **education** is used to fight against intolerance.*
Education is considered the most effective means of preventing intolerance, and thus the UN considers it an 'urgent imperative'⁴ – arguing that it should be used to teach people about their shared rights and freedoms, to counter influences that lead to fear and exclusion and to develop capacities of independent judgement.
- *That we are **committed to act** against intolerance.*
The UN declares that we must be committed to promoting the principles of tolerance and non-violence in the fields of education, science, culture and communication.

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *International Day for Tolerance*, 2018, <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/toleranceday>

⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance*, 1995, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13175&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

- That the **International Day for Tolerance** is celebrated to raise awareness worldwide. This final principle proclaimed the 16th November as the annual International Day for Tolerance, launched to increase awareness of the principles of tolerance and the danger of intolerance for communities and societies worldwide.

UN Approach to Countering Intolerance

According to the United Nations, the fight against intolerance requires 5 different factors:

- **Law:**
Each government is responsible for enforcing human rights laws and for banning discrimination and maltreatment of minorities and disadvantaged groups. The state should also ensure that equal access to the courts and to other legal and non-legal mechanisms are ensured, and that all groups are treated fairly and evenly.
- **Education:**
Given that intolerance is often 'rooted in ignorance and fear', whether that may be fear of the unknown, of the other, or of different nations, cultures and religions, and closely linked to 'an exaggerated sense of self-worth and pride', education is required to prevent these notions from developing at a young age.⁵ Education is required to ensure that people are tolerant of all societies and cultures.
- **Access to information:**
Intolerance is especially dangerous when it enables people to fulfil political and territorial ambitions of an intolerant nature. Such 'hatemongers' often manipulate the 'tolerance threshold' of a given society, using it to their advantage by developing false arguments and employing false statistics to support them. As such, a key means of fighting intolerance is to develop policies that promote freedom of speech, especially by encouraging press pluralism and freedom of the press.
- **Individual awareness:**
Given that societal intolerance is made up of the intolerance of individual members – from bigotry to stereotyping and racial jokes – it is necessary for individuals to become aware of their intolerant behavior in order to fight against it on a societal level. Indeed, this is also necessary for issues such as violence and mistrust in a society to be tackled, given that a culture of ignorance breeds such behaviors and attitudes.
- **Local solution:**
While the problems of intolerance may appear mostly on the global stage, few realize that the solutions to the problems are mostly local. Indeed, it is not enough to wait for governments and institutions to act. Each individual can protest and fight against intolerance, either by having tolerant attitudes themselves or by organize a grassroots movement or network to work towards putting an end to intolerance, violence and hatred.

⁵ Social and Human Sciences, *Promoting Tolerance*, 2012, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/fight-against-discrimination/promoting-tolerance/>

UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize

A key part of this International Day revolves around recognizing key institutions, organizations or figures that have been especially influential in the promotion of the principles of tolerance. This is done through the assignation of the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize, awarded every two years and marked by a ceremony during which the winner is presented with the sum of US\$ 100,000.

The 2020 edition of the Prize has been awarded to the NGO *Centre Résolution Conflits* (Centre for Resolution of Conflicts - CRC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The international Jury of the Prize recommended the CRC in recognition of its work for the defense of human rights, its tireless commitment to the rescue of child soldiers from militia groups, and their rehabilitation and reintegration into their home communities. Thanks to the NGO, nearly 1,000 ex-child soldiers returned to peaceful life in their communities since 2011 returning to school or professional trainings. CRC also trains agricultural cooperatives to promote tolerance and build mutual understanding between different communities. It has provided 40 agricultural communities with training in new agricultural techniques, financial management and peaceful conflict resolution between 2014 and 2018, helping almost 2,000 people increase their income and learn to trust ex-combatants.⁶

Persistent Challenges

As globalization accelerates, societies across the world are undergoing deep transformation and while opportunities for communication across communities multiply so do opportunities for people to challenge the principle of tolerance. An illustration of this is the recent rise of separatist politics, which has pushed numerous people to identify with intolerant attitudes and support the implementation of discriminatory policies, isolating some groups while openly favoring others.

Below some examples of forms of intolerance that still today remain widespread in society causing violations of rights and discrimination at the expenses of certain groups. These topics urgently require our attention and need to be addressed with prompt and concrete measures.

Religious Intolerance

Religious intolerance is unfortunately a global constant, often backed by private violence, hate crimes, discriminatory politics, and government indifference. It is almost impossible to turn on the news without witnessing scenes of hatred, violence and intolerance perpetrated in the name of religion or belief. Indeed, according to a recent report by the Pew Research Center, violence and discrimination against religious groups by governments and rival faiths have reached new heights in all regions.⁷

⁶ UNESCO. 2020. https://en.unesco.org/prizes/madanjeet_singh

⁷ Universal Rights Group GVA. 2014. <https://www.universal-rights.org/urg-policy-reports/combating-global-religious-intolerance-the-implementation-of-human-rights-council-resolution-1618/>

In the face of such trends, it is clear that the fight against religious intolerance and discrimination must be a key priority for the international community, and in particular the UN and its Human Rights Council. The main UN global policy framework for combatting intolerance, stigmatization, discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief is set down in Council resolution 16/18, adopted in March 2011 and hailed by stakeholders from all regions and faiths as a turning point in international efforts to confront religious intolerance.

However, despite these efforts, the issue of religious intolerance is far from being solved. People across the globe continue suffering from intolerance and discrimination based on religion with serious consequences. Regardless of their religion, people who experience more intolerance feel a lower sense of belonging in society, in their workplace or school. Research shows that a sense of belonging is critical for positive mental and physical health and for motivation and success, so this effect of religious intolerance can be quite detrimental to people's well-being. Moreover, people who experience more religious intolerance express more prejudice toward other groups and more favoritism toward their own groups. This finding is interesting, as it highlights how groups that feel targeted because of their religion can become perpetrators of prejudice themselves. It may be human nature to denigrate groups that we perceive reject us but doing so can create a spiral of increasing religious intolerance. These results highlight how a negative reciprocal spiral of religious-based prejudice harms everyone, and how events that may not affect people individually can nevertheless affect them psychologically, with effects that can spread and multiply over time and across societies.⁸

Both, believers and nonbelievers should contribute to protect religious freedom and to spread the principles of tolerance, as this is the foundation of other liberties and helps highlighting societies prone to discrimination and violence. A government unwilling to protect people with a different view of the transcendent almost certainly will not tolerate contrary positions on practical political issues.

Xenophobia

Xenophobia is a prejudice related to the false notion that people from other countries, ethnicity or cultures are a threat; the more "different" the other is perceived, the stronger the fears and negative feelings tend to be. It is one of the most common forms of and grounds for discrimination still present in our societies, threatening human rights and peaceful coexistence.

In social and political reality, xenophobia manifests itself in accordance with the division of the world into one's own race, nation, ethnic group, and culture, in opposition to other races, nations, ethnic groups, and cultures. This type of symbolic and normative worldview promotes self-centeredness and constitutes precisely the kind of dangerous cognitive framework within which xenophobia is spawned, articulated, and disseminated.⁹

⁸ Society for Personality and Social Psychology. 2019. <https://spssp.org/news-center/blog/cook-pasek-intolerance>

⁹ Science Direct. 2001. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B0080430767009803>

Intolerance of others on grounds of race, nationality or ethnicity is an area of high public salience, with significant implications for policy, social outcomes and well-being. Intolerance is widely perceived as having been on the rise in recent years, together with an increased support for and visibility of extremist and populist political parties, as well as an apparent rise in manifestations of intolerant attitudes, both in national policy and more widely in the behavior of individuals. The widespread practices of deportation and unequal treatment of migrants, as well as the structural discrimination against certain ethnic minorities such as Roma by many governments, are clear examples of xenophobia and intolerance towards foreigners.

As an illustration of this, according to recent data, the world is growing less tolerant of migrants and foreigners, with a number of EU countries topping the list of the least-accepting countries in the world. Overall, societies are slightly less accepting of migrants today than it was three years ago, according to Gallup's latest update of its Migrant Acceptance Index. Between 2016 and 2019, the global score on the index, which gauges people's acceptance of migrants and foreigners, declined from 5.34 to 5.21.¹⁰

Sexism, Homophobia and Transphobia

Gender-related intolerance involves different types of discrimination, including that of women as opposed to men (sexism), that of gay people as opposed to heterosexual people (homophobia) and that of transgender or transsexual people as opposed to cisgender people, whose gender identity is consistent with the sex assigned at birth (transphobia).

Intolerance based on gender and sexual orientation still occurs in all societies, in spite of the fact that many states have adopted anti-discrimination legislation. Worldwide, LGBTQ+ people and women are subjected to different forms of discrimination and violence, from verbal attacks to being murdered.

Discrimination against women remains widespread across the globe, with laws that institutionalize second class status for women and girls with regard to nationality, health, education, marital rights, employment rights, parental rights, inheritance and property rights. As a result of decades of discrimination, women form the majority of the world's poorest people; they work two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of the world's food, yet they earn only 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property. Further, violence against women throughout the world prevails on an unimaginable scale, and their access to justice is often paired with discriminatory obstacles. In some countries, unlike men, women cannot dress as they like, drive, work at night, inherit property or give evidence in Court. The vast majority of expressly discriminatory laws in force relate to family life, including limiting a woman's right to marry, thus allowing for sex discriminatory marital practices such as child marriage, wife obedience and polygamy.¹¹

¹⁰ GALLUP. 2020. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/320678/world-grows-less-accepting-migrants.aspx>

¹¹ OHCHR. 2020. https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/discrimination/pages/discrimination_women.aspx

LGBTQ+ people also suffer high levels of discrimination worldwide and are often denied their human rights, including the right to work, as they get fired or are discriminated against by employers because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and the right to safety and security, as they are often bullied and harassed. Moreover, lesbian and gay couples in many countries feel discriminated in such fundamental areas as the right to marry, to constitute a family or to adopt children.¹²

GICJ Position and Recommendations

On the acknowledgement of this International Day of Tolerance, Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) reiterates the importance of using all available means to condemn and prevent all forms of intolerance, as well as to spread awareness of the principles and practices of tolerance globally. In a world ridden with extremism, societal injustice and conflict, policies and laws devoted to spread the principles of tolerance should be a key priority.

Therefore, GICJ urges States and citizens to do all they can to spread awareness of the principles of tolerance, work towards better assimilation of such principles in societies across the world, and fight against contemporary challenges to tolerance on a national and international scale.

Specifically, GICJ suggests those in positions of authority the following recommendations:

- Adopt a comprehensive definition of intolerance in the national legislation, implementing policies aimed at promoting diversity and condemning any form of discrimination.
- Increase the funds and the efforts toward awareness campaigns of the principles of tolerance both at the national and international level, promoting the establishment of counselling centers and supporting activities designed for the fight against intolerance.
- Include in the national education curriculum classes focused on teaching students about diversity and multi-culturalism, promoting tolerance, freedom of opinion and peaceful coexistence in society since early childhood.

¹² Council of Europe. 2020. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/discrimination-and-intolerance>

Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) is an international, independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation based in Geneva-Switzerland. GICJ has been tackling issues of justice and accountability pertaining to Switzerland. GICJ maintains partnerships with various NGOs, lawyers and a vast civil society and network within Switzerland and the European region. Through these channels, GICJ receives documentation and evidence of human rights violations and abuses in Switzerland as they occur and report that to the human rights bodies in Geneva



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