

Nature loves diversity. There are 1.2 million identified species in the world while it is estimated that there are 8.7 million species (1). As humans, we understand the importance of safeguarding regions with abundant biodiversity. Consider, for instance, the 2021 ruling by the Constitutional Court, which declared Los Cedros Biological Reserve in Ecuador off-limits to any activities that threaten the rights of nature (2). While we recognize the value of preserving biodiversity in the natural world, why do we, *Homo sapiens*, sometimes find it challenging to embrace diversity within our own species? Diversity is a source of beauty and strength. Reflecting on my reading of the thirty articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), I couldn't help but ask myself, "Have we truly achieved these principles?" Sadly, my answer, each time, was either "no" or "I'm not sure." This realization saddened me. Equality, freedom, and justice for all are three pillars of building a society and each of us should take responsibility and commit to fortify these pillars.

Equality means assuring equal rights, opportunity, and treatment irrespective of the differences in race, age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or any other defining characteristics. However, we have not fully realized this ideal. Recent events, such as the Supreme Court of India's rejection of the appeal for same-sex marriage on October 17, 2023, underscore the ongoing challenges we face in achieving true equality. It is worth noting that the UDHR, under Article 16, references the right to marriage but specifies "men and women." Our evolving society confronts new and complex challenges in the pursuit of equality.

Furthermore, Article 4 of the UDHR addresses the prohibition of slavery. Have we truly eradicated this grave injustice? Take, for instance, the Kamaiya system in Nepal. In this system, workers enter into voluntary contracts with landlords, who clear their debts in exchange for labor. If the debt is not settled by the worker's death, it automatically transfers to the next

generation. Shockingly, this practice persists in Nepal, despite its prohibition in the year 2000 (3). Similarly, the story of a Latin American girl who recently participated in a cultural exchange program in the United States of America is another example of this issue. Placed with a host family, she found herself exploited for her labor, essentially resembling a different form of the Kamaiya system. It is a clear violation of Article 4 of the UDHR.

Independence Day, celebrated in the United States on July 4th, is a day of festivities and fireworks. It's a time when we commemorate freedom. On July 4, 2022, my wife and I visited the St. Louis Arch to witness the fireworks. However, amid the excitement, my first thought was the need for an exit plan and a cover in case of a potential gun assault. Sadly, on that very day in Chicago, a mass shooting occurred, resulting in one fatality and five others injured (4). Mass shootings have become tragically common in the United States. Is this independence/freedom? Freedom is, in essence, an individual's right to make choices. Choices today must be carefully made. I refrain from going to mass gatherings. I do not believe that I am free.

Article 3 of the UDHR underscores the right to security, a fundamental need. As I write this, I have learned that one of my friends was the victim of a random assault this afternoon on the streets of Quito, Ecuador. In a broader scale, The Israel and Palestinian conflict, as well as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflicts, have resulted in massive loss of life. Both in personal and global scale, security seems elusive.

Justice is a general concept that everyone should be treated fairly. There should be equal opportunity for all. Nonetheless, a punishable crime should be treated accordingly. Simultaneously, we must consider equal rights to education as vital component of justice. In the year 2000, 86.2% and 75.6% of males and females globally were literate (5). Progress, however, has been made. In 2020, figures improved to 90.2% for males and 83.5% for females. While the

path to educational equality is slower, we are moving towards right direction. As an educator, I've noticed that the trend is evolving, with a significant female presence in my biology classes.

Reading my points above, I feel that I have become terribly negative in life. A decade ago, at 21, I radiated positivity and optimism. With age, love should flourish within, but opposite has occurred. The daily immersion in violent news has instilled undying fear in life. Yet, amid this pervasive negativity, I also see hope. Events like the World Culture Festival, held from September 29 to October 1, 2023, stand as powerful symbol of optimism. In Washington DC, this festival united over 450,000 participants and featured 17,000 artists performing on the National Mall (7). There, world leaders came together to emphasize the values of peace, love, and harmony. Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon passionately articulated the need for global cultural, spiritual, and moral unity as the means to resolve conflicts. Another source of hope lies in individuals like His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the founder of the Art of Living Foundation and a prominent humanitarian leader. He envisions a society free from stress and violence and tirelessly travels the world, spreading love and happiness. They serve as a reminder of what is needed to turn the ideals of equality, freedom, and justice into a living reality for all.

The Declaration has shaped society towards betterment. It has helped in promoting values, building laws, building international cooperation, education, and activism. However, we have come a long way since 1948. The challenges in society are different than 75 years ago. Nevertheless, I cannot be more grateful to be living in a more peaceful world. Therefore, we all must take responsibility to spread love and kindness and wholeheartedly shun hate. I understand that freedom of speech and expression are cherished rights, but one should be careful what comes out of their mouth because garbage stinks, and a bucket of flowers gives a sweet fragrance.

References

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