EU can no longer 'turn a blind eye' to victims of discrimination

Written by Michaël Privot on 9 March 2015 in Opinion

Solutions exist to combat discrimination in the EU, but their implementation will require 'political courage', writes Michaël Privot.

55 years ago, on 21 March, 69 black individuals who were peacefully demonstrating for equality and against apartheid laws were killed for their involvement in the event. This date has since been declared the "international day for the elimination of racial discrimination" [1], in remembrance of the harmful impact of racism on individuals and communities.

Today, it is more important than ever to seize this opportunity to take stock of progress - or lack thereof - in combating racial discrimination in Europe. There is unfortunately little to celebrate for the 60 million EU citizens and residents who face racism and discrimination on a daily basis.

For ethnic and religious minorities in Europe, including black people, Roma, Muslims, Jews and migrants from non-EU countries, discrimination continues to be a major obstacle in many areas of life
- whether when looking for a job, accommodation, in education or when seeking access to justice. Not to mention daily incidents of racist violence - from 'trivial' jibes to violent physical attacks.

The ongoing financial and economic crisis which Europe has been facing for the last seven years, coupled with a lack of social investment, has hardly helped matters. Instead, discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities and migrants has increased, as has the employment gap between the latter and the rest of the population.

In Finland and Belgium, for instance, unemployment rates are three times higher for people born outside the EU - irrespective of their qualifications. In the Netherlands, more than half of recruitment agencies complied with a request not to introduce candidates of Moroccan, Turkish or Surinamese descent.

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The recent terror and anti-Semitic attacks in France and Copenhagen have shown what the vicious circle of exclusion, mutual fear and suspicion can lead to. Social inequalities lead to exclusion and violence, and youth who do not feel they are part of society, without any perspective of a better future, are more and more attracted towards ideologies and groups promoting radical violence, whether jihadist organisations or far-right movements.

In this light, it is essential to take a comprehensive approach to effectively combat racism. EU leaders and decision makers can take the following steps to achieve this.

First, there are strong EU equality laws in place, but these need to be better enforced and further improved. Too many employers, for instance, eschew their responsibility because discrimination cases are not pursued or do not result in any sanctions, turning legislation into an implicit licence to discriminate.

Similarly, EU legislation on combating racist violence should be reinforced to ensure that racist motives of alleged crimes are systematically unveiled by the police and that victims are better protected.

Laws must also be complemented by specific policy strategies to address Afrophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. The adoption of the European framework for national Roma integration strategies in 2011 demonstrated the EU's political will to fight the specific discrimination faced by its largest ethnic minority. Now, other communities experiencing specific discrimination also need targeted actions and policies.

Finally, the EU should ensure that member states collect equality data to measure racial and religious discrimination, as systematically as they do with gender and age. Without actual figures, how can policymakers monitor the effectiveness of anti-discrimination measures?

Solutions exist, but they require political courage. The EU institutions can no longer turn a blind eye to the fact that allowing millions of people to be discriminated against and excluded results in a huge waste of talents, skills and wealth, ultimately affecting the wellbeing of all people living in Europe.

If they continue to bury their heads in the sand, racism, exclusion and violence will continue to be our reality for the years to come.
About the author

Michaël Privot is director of the European network against racism (ENAR)
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