

# IMAGINE, CREATE, ELEVATE

FINXERUNT ISSUE 3: SOCIAL JUSTICE



CREATED BY STUDENTS  
FOR THE WORLD

## Features

**FOOD DESERTS: ONE OF AMERICA'S  
MOST FATAL DISCRETIONS**

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**CRIMINAL JUSTICE - RIGHTEOUS  
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BY JOSEPHINE KINLAN

**MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS:  
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BY NUZHAT JANNAT

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## FINXERUNT ISSUE 3: SOCIAL JUSTICE

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*Imagine, Create, Elevate* is a bi-monthly student publication at Finxerunt Non-Profit Limited-Licensed Corporation of which analytically deepens the focus on a vast array socioeconomic issues are the world. Through journalism, the mission of *Imagine, Create, Elevate* is to elevate student voices as a part of Finxerunt's Student Civic Engagement campaign.

In Latin, Finxerunt means to **imagine** and **create**. And it's been a word that has inspired hundreds of students to take initiative around the world since 2017. As a growing non-profit organization, our mission is to go beyond passive activism by empowering the youth to address socio-economic issues and lead tangible change to build a sustainable future with the philosophy that anyone can make a positive difference regardless of race or gender.

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# How Socioeconomic Status Can Affect the Well-Being Of Students

BY ANTHONY MATHAI



*Photo Credit: Snayini Das (Instagram: @d\_snayini\_photography)*

From the moment we breathe, we have learned to adjust to the norms of a household, love the ones that have raised us and lived, and live in the manner in which our community guidelines present us with. It is an accepted convention as well: our emotional connection to our homes has taught us to view the place we grew up in as more than just a building with four walls and a roof, but rather as a vessel of life-changing events that arouse feelings of contentment, love, and security.

As worthy citizens of the United

States, we tend to be amenable with our living style and would not want to refract our lifestyle, even if we were impecunious tramps or eminent billionaires. Our homes are essentially our ultimate comfort zones. In retrospect, certain living conditions would definitely cross the line of what would be considered acceptable. Although many cosmopolitan areas in America have taken the necessary precautions to mitigate the harmful effects of lead in their residences, other areas, particularly the un-

developed ones, have not taken action against this overwhelming issue.

We have all heard the ironclad rules of childhood and adolescence: drinking is not permitted for anyone under 21 years of age in order to avoid any harmful interference with the brain's development. The same thing applies to children with constant exposure to hazardous wastes, perhaps even more so. Recently, the CDC reported that the most common hazardous material in poor

residencies is lead. Particularly, children who reside in a home below the federal poverty level and those who live in housing built before 1978 are at the greatest risk of lead exposure. The housing inequity present in the modern world has drastic negative side effects for our youth, as some of those who are just trying to obtain a place in their lives are left at this huge disadvantage.

The exposure of lead on cognitive development has been sporadically recorded on a number of different circumstances. The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study has shown vast differences in the brain development of 9,712 children of 9 to 10 years of age, and the study did indicate that those from low-income households did have decreased cortical area and volume and had elevated blood lead levels, which could ultimately lead to learning and behavior problems, coordina-

tion problems, and a significantly decreased attention span. Our youths should not be exposed to these kinds of toxic metals, especially lead, as low socioeconomic status surely suggests a downgrade in the intellectual and creative potential of upcoming generations.

Particularly in areas of the country where living conditions are of low quality, students are hit with the hardest consequences. Take the rural areas of Flint, Michigan: high corrosion rates due to high oxygen levels have seen lead seep into the sewage system, with the lowest quality pipes being most affected. It is also important to note that this region in Michigan has almost 40% of residents living in poverty. What is even more shocking is the local government's response to the issue. The locals objected, but no response was shown to address the crisis.

It really does come to show the lack of concern for those who are

disadvantaged, particularly the youths who live through the crisis indefinitely. Even worse, according to the American Psychological Association, those with low socioeconomic status tend to have more sedentary lifestyles, thus increasing exposure in the communities more frequently than usual. And ever since the COVID-19 pandemic slapped across the country with remote learning opportunities (staying at home more often), this has only seen even more students fall victim to these conditions.

However, there are legitimate methods to combat the effects of a student with low Socio-Economic Status (SES). Increasing affordable high-quality childcare has proven to help students on the academic and intellectual level. Affordable childcare centers have been proven to “increase attention spans, foster a better school performance, and make children have greater enthusiasm for learning, which can prove to be a better means of growth for children.” Increasing affordable healthcare for families that must combat lead poisoning would prove to be a great way to reinforce an active service for disadvantaged youths. Educating the adults in low SES backgrounds about the dangers of lead poisoning to their child can be another option as well, as studies indicate that some adults that run low SES households are even unaware of hazardous waste in their homes.





There is no reason why children should suffer because of their guardian's flow of income or unawareness of their surroundings, and we should truly allow them to live to their true potential. The main problem, though, is that lead removal is an expensive process and people do not always express genuine concern surrounding the issue. However, lead awareness and removal can only be addressed if it is prioritized politically, so it is vital that certain regulations are put into place to ensure that people know the hazards of living in lead-contaminated areas. For example, laws can be implemented prohibiting the negligence of peeling

or chipping paint in homes to avoid immediate exposure to lead. Since the corrosion of pipes (caused by high oxygen levels in pipes) frequently allows lead to seep into the water supply, maintaining the good quality of pipes through expert plumbers can mitigate this hazard. Lastly, landlords should be held responsible if any parts of a residence are poorly maintained such that a potential hazard is present.

In short, our negligence and indifference to the welfare of children will only do more harm than good. It is easy to overlook a hazard like lead exposure and be indifferent to it, but it will only

impact the potential of our youths because of the health hazards it can pose like learning and behavior problems, a decreased attention span, and coordination problems. The only solution to this, however, as cliché as it might sound, is through awareness and action through the protocols discussed. If we can ensure that children grow to their maximum potential, then we can be sure that our children have a bright future ahead of them.

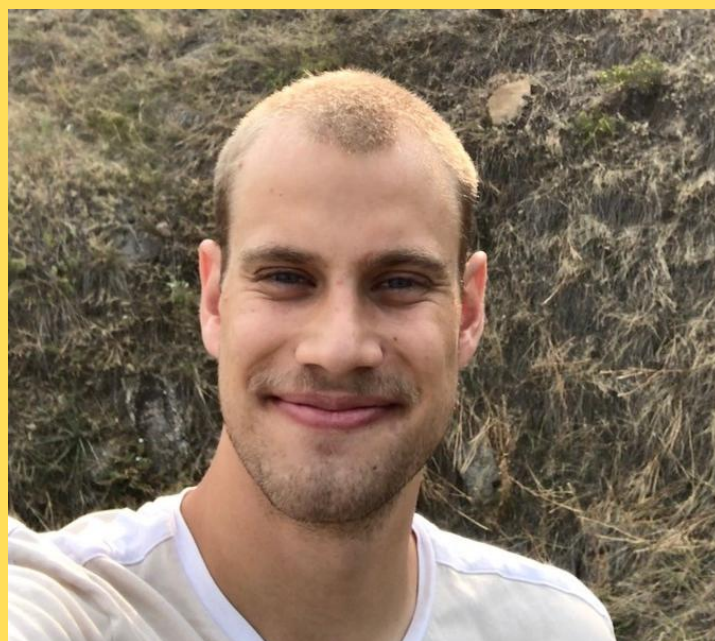


# Are Modern Movements Radical or Revitalizing? A Talk With Activist Arthur Borden-Heilman

BY CHYONIKA ROY

The American people have always been rebellious. From the American Revolution to women's suffrage, these movements have all set the precedent for future generations to expand upon the fight for basic human rights, thus inspiring a whole new wave of social justice activism - Black Lives Matter, March For Our Lives, HeForShe, and many others. These modern day movements in the current media created such a frenzy as rhetoric about them has garnered a reputation of being radical by many and revitalizing by others. But what do these activists think of themselves, and how do they use the precedents set by other movements to continue their advocacy? To answer these questions and many more, I spoke with Arthur Borden-Heilman, a leader and member of the Sunrise Movement's NYC hub.

The Sunrise Movement is one of the many organizations involved with the modern day environmental justice movement. It was started by college students to address the intersectionality of social issues with the climate crisis and other environmental issues. Sunrise has gotten much national recognition after a sit-in at House Leader Nancy Pelosi's office, as well as supporting policy ideas such as the Green New Deal, a resolution that was introduced by the House to lay out necessary guidelines to equitably transition away from fossil fuels. With the growth of the Sunrise Movement's prominence, I wanted to sit down with Arthur to see what he thinks about Sunrise in the national and local context, and to see if the rhetoric of the movement has garnered truth.



## How did you get involved with Sunrise?

ARTHUR: I got involved with Sunrise a year ago because the Sunrise Movement was working with the Alexandria Ocasio Cortez campaign. Then as soon as she got elected into office in 2018, she participated in the Nancy Pelosi sit-in that Sunrise hosted. And as I sort of got more familiar with Sunrise, I noticed that many of the young organizers were very educated and well-spoken. I searched up my local chapter in NYC and then started attending hub meetings, and the rest is history. I am currently the leader in the Green New Deal for Public Housing, sort of the policy side of the hub.

*The Green New Deal for Public Housing is a bill connecting to the original Green New Deal resolution that focuses on equitable and environmentally conscious public housing. The bill calls for things such as making sure apartments are good to live in. The*



*residents' health is met with things like retrofitting buildings, which is a huge thing for many NYC residents who live in public housing, whose Arthur's work most directly impacts.*

**How do you think the Sunrise Movement and the overall larger environmental movement is different from your predecessor? How is it the same?**

ARTHUR: The first and second wave of environmentalism focused exclusively on the natural world and the environment. It was successful when it gained traction back in the 70's. But what it failed to do was keep the activist momentum going from the 80's into the 2000's. This was due to the fact that many in the movement disappeared into the hands of lobbyists and gray corporate suits. But more than that, it also didn't update to bring equality into the picture. Let me give you an example: the 90's were one of the first times where environmental justice was more frequently talked about. So people weren't just looking at how environmental issues impact organisms in the wild, but real people too. We saw that the same issues that impacted the animals impacted people as well, specifically people of color.

**Why does Sunrise build different collisions with different movements such as Black Lives Matter and what does this help sunrise in the long term?**

ARTHUR: The people who hold the power at the core of capitalism and racism and the people who enforce these systems are also perpetuating the environmental climate crisis. It is the people who hold the most power who are trying to keep people divided so that they can profit off of others. In order to fight that, we need a coalition that is made up of many different people because you can't have people divided. The Dakota Access Pipeline is a good example of this. The pipeline initially cut through a middle class white community,

and because the white community didn't want a pipeline in their land, they used their political power to redirect the pipeline to an indigenous community instead. But those in charge of the pipeline didn't listen nor value their voices as much as their white counterparts. Thus, coalitions are necessary so that we value everyone's perspectives and the issues that come with them.

**What has the Sunrise Movement learned from past movements?**

ARTHUR: There is a long history of community organizing which you can trace back for a long time fighting for local issues such as a stop sign. Then there is movement-building, which fights for changing the common consensus of culture, such as advocating for gay rights. Petitions and surveys are things movements do to change the consensus. While the two lineages of community organizing and movement-building are separate, community organizers and movement builders are always arguing which is better. But there are a number of examples, like the Civil Rights Movement, Occupy Wall Street, and BLM, which are hybrid models that do movement-building and community organizing at the same time. Sunrise follows that model and learned from other movements that it's critical to have boots on the ground and hand-to-hand combat of community organizing. Sunrise has also learned to do broad cultural work of movement building because you can't have one without the other.

**Sunrise has hubs which are more localized groups focused on individual areas of the country; we, specifically, are in the NYC hub. How do you think that hubs help in influencing change and how does that connect with the larger picture in terms of movements?**

ARTHUR: The question you are really asking me is centralized structure versus decentralized structure.

And to that question, centralized structures are great at having a common philosophy and for making sure that everyone is on the same page. However, centralized structures are bad at mobilizing quickly and broadly. A good example of a centralized structure is the ACLU or NAACP, where they have a very strong national coalition and extensive power in offices around the countries. But things have to go through a centralized system in order to get things done. Decentralized structures are excellent at mobilizing quickly and excellent at making huge amounts of change very quickly, but at the same time are also very bad at establishing common ground in terms of sharing the same theories of change.

**Some people think that the modern day activist movements that Sunrise are pro-pellant in are radical and revitalizing an old form of movement building, as well as extremism. How do you personally view Sunrise and do you agree with the sentiments presented?**

ARTHUR: I think anytime in history when someone proposed a bold change, they have been called radical. And if you are trying to advocate for a new future, for a better future, it is outside the realm of what people find possible today. In that way, being called radical is a compliment. If you are not being called radical, then you are not advocating for a big enough change. So

anytime politicians call us radical, I know what we are doing is working. If we don't shake the status quo, then we won't impact the lives of the people who need change. So I take being called a "radical" as a compliment because it shows we are dreaming big enough for a future that will include all of us. I think revitalizing is like a pair of old boots that you made when you were younger, not knowing that much about making boots. Boots slowly wear out over time, and you didn't make them strong enough to withstand the conditions necessary to climb mountains or go for long walks. So after a while, you wanted to make the boots waterproof due to walking home in the rain a lot. You think to yourself that you can add water proof spray on the surface and leather on the sides to make them stronger. And you can do that. But the shoes have gotten worn down from being wet and soggy so many times. Just by twisting your ankles, the leather of the boots are ripped. So you keep doing things such as putting water proof spray to reinforce it temporarily. But what is far more important is that we take radical change to make new and revitalized boots, which have everything that you need and have learned. Because at one point, you won't wear the shoes and they will become useless. So while revitalization is critical and bridging new light and energy to something is critical.

**Where do you want to take the Sunrise Movement and it's coalitions in the future?**

ARTHUR: We can't bring back the things that failed in past movements because they were not able to bring top down infrastructure reform that is necessary for issues to stop perpetuating further. So, you can't stop imagining and you have to be bold and courageous enough for radical change.

**How is Sunrise's work going to make it easier for future movements of change? What do you want to continue to do at Sunrise?**







ARTHUR: Every week, we have passionate people who join a Sunrise hub but end up leaving, which is understandable since conflicts do come up. But we need to make sure that the people who come in have the opportunity to be trained, mentored, and coached so when they leave Sunrise, they know more about how to affect change than when they came in. I find our role in paving the way for future movements is helping to educate and mentor young organizers, as well as helping them be the best activists that they can be.

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*So that connects back to the main question of this article: are these current movements radical or revitalizing, and why? The answer varies greatly and can be subject to different reasoning, but what can be learned from these movements is how to collaborate with one another for the purposes of reaching shared intersectional goals. Radical, revitalizing, both, or neither is in the eyes of the beholder. Yet, it is the person who is courageous enough to challenge a system. They have a heavy head because they hold the weight of the world, criticism and cynicism alike.*



# Food Deserts: One of America's Most Fatal Discretions

BY KILHAH ST FORT

Food. Everyone wants it and everyone needs it. Unfortunately, this is not as simple as it may seem. Geographical location, poverty, unstable markets, and various other contributors make it difficult for many people to acquire food, let alone food that is nutritious. With this lack of accessibility to affordable and nutritious food comes a plethora of health conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, and cardiovascular disease. Horrible, but preventable nonetheless.

While this may be news to some, millions of Americans are living this reality. Roughly 23 million people are currently residing in over 6,000 communities known as “food deserts,” which are low-income areas with limited or no access to affordable and nutritious food (USDA, 2012). According to Bronx resident Josephine Kinlan, these locations are neighborhoods where “the only food markets are small convenience stores or bodegas, or if there is no food service at all, just liquor, drug, and retail stores.”

For years, it was believed that food deserts exist strictly due to economic differences. However, recent studies insist otherwise.

## Race and Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a “household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.” Essentially, this means someone does not have the proper funds to afford to maintain a healthy, life-long diet. Over the years, food insecurity has been becoming more and more common: increasing from an estimated one in nine Americans being found food insecure in 2018 to one in four households experiencing food insecurity within this year alone.

Various studies have shown that food insecurity can fall heavier on some communities than others. The USDA has reported that 21.2% of black households and 16.2% of Hispanic households have experienced food insecurity in 2018. This number is drastically different from the 8.1% of white, non-Hispanic households that have experienced food insecurity that same year, a number which is less than the average percent for all households in the United States.

A 2014 study conducted by Kelly M. Bower, an assistant professor at John Hopkins University School of Nursing, revealed the poorest neighborhoods



struggle the most to access healthy food services. Although this fact was already known, Dr. Bower was shocked to find a correlation between race and the amount of super-markets in an area. After comparing urban black and urban white neighborhoods of the same economic status, it was discovered “the poor black neighborhoods had the very fewest supermarkets.”

As a youth who has witnessed the day to day life in food deserts while growing up in the Bronx, Kinlan has cited race to play a major factor in the existence of food desserts. For her, it is more specifically the economic systematic racism of America. “With the majority of food desert communities being low-income, and black and brown, there is obvious evidence that food insecurity perpetuates systemic racism within our communities,” states Kinlan. “The economic history of black and brown individuals in our society has left more black and brown residents with less property than their white counterparts, and thus more likely to live within lower-income communities, where food deserts are more common.”

### **Social Distance or Tonight's Dinner?**

The federal mandated quarantine made leaving the house difficult, even for those who were not as cautious about the virus. Since safety protocols were put in place,

while many were left wondering when they would be able to buy groceries.

Researchers at Northwestern University estimated food insecurity to be more than doubled due to the pandemic. Previously, only 10.5% of American households experienced food insecurity at least once during 2019. This number has jumped to 23%.

Grocery stores had to shorten their operating hours. On top of that, people were rushing to buy as much as they could to stock up, in preparation for the worst scenario possible. The six-feet-apart protocol added to this stress, seeing as a limited number of people were allowed in stores at a time. The waiting lines would often wind around the entire block. These are all changes that people residing in areas with access to nutritious food had to make.

Food desert residents had to make this adjustment as well, alongside being the only ones dealing with transportation limitations. The United States Department of Agriculture has found urban food deserts to be over a mile away from supermarkets, while rural food deserts tend to be over ten miles away on average. Additionally, the percentage of households without vehicle access in food deserts compared to the percentage of households without vehicle access in other neighborhoods is much greater. With urban food deserts, averaging

24-38 percent higher and rural food deserts, averaging 15 percent higher, many residents rely on public transportation.

Due to COVID-19, residents had to make the decision between risking their health to buy healthy food for their families or stay COVID-free but risk their health with fatty, processed foods from dollar stores. Given that ultimatum, residents would often choose going to dollar stores.

### **The Intersection of Race, COVID-19, and Food Accessibility**

Rather than being two separate contributors to the severity of the food crisis, COVID-19 managed to compound on top of the relationship between race and food accessibility. New York City, a highly populated, racially diverse urban area, is a testament to this statement.

Based on the COVID-19 Household Pulse Survey (conducted from April to July 2020 on New York residents), the New York State Health Foundation has provided an analysis shedding light on the rising food scarcity in New York. Compared to the percentages among white New Yorkers, Hispanic and black New Yorkers are three to four times more likely to experience food scarcity, with 17-25% of Hispanic residents and 15-22% of black residents suffering from the phenomenon. The reason





behind this gap is most likely that black and Hispanic New Yorkers already experience food instability, seeing as they make up a large number of food desert residents.

As of June 2020, New York's unemployment rates for workers of color have exceeded the national unemployment rates for workers of color. It is no surprise that communities of color are taking the brunt. A combination of bulk buying, out-of-reach supermarkets, and employees with low-paying jobs being the first ones cut was the undoing of these communities. Since they already struggled to get by prior to the pandemic, they did not have any preparations to deal with COVID-19.

## **Solutions**

Food deserts are a huge problem to tackle, accompanied by other smaller issues. However, this does not mean combating the food crisis is hopeless. For years there has been efforts on the federal, state, and community level to bring nutritious food to these areas. Rather than being discouraged by COVID-19, these efforts are being doubled. A particular organization known for continuing to make food accessibility a reality is the "Catholic Charities Brooklyn and Queens" food pantry network. Consisting of twenty food pantries spread out throughout the two boroughs, the parish-based, volunteer-

run organization has done tremendous work before and after COVID-19.

Prior to the pandemic, Jennifer Smith, the Food Pantry Resource Supervisor, was responsible for overseeing the food pantries by placing orders, working with the organization's funders, and conducting site visits. Now she spends every day at one of the twenty pantries assisting in the preparation of meals. The pantries are typically volunteer-run, but since they have become so busy, there are not enough volunteers around to handle the workload. Instead, some of the work has to land on paid workers like Smith.

"We went from seeing 35-45



people a week to 400-500 people a week,” Smith tells us, referring to one of the food pantries, “Our Ladies of Angels” in Bayridge. In the month of September alone, the organization fed roughly 61,000 New Yorkers over their twenty locations. Smith also mentions how the majority of the people there were “directly affected by COVID. Restaurant workers who lost their jobs, day laborers, taxi drivers, maids, and housekeepers.”

Despite the staggering numbers, Smith and her team took it in stride. The number of volunteers have also increased alongside the number of New Yorkers relying on the pantry to get nutritious and affordable food. In every community where a pantry is located, people often walk up and drop off donations or ask to volunteer.

What makes Catholic Charities stand out is not just the positive impact they are having on community involvement but also, their dedication to providing people with healthy and nutritious food. “In our pantry, we really try to whenever we can have fresh produce, have whole grains, have brown rice, low sugar food, low salt food,” asserts Smith. “A lot of people are having to choose whether to pay rent or get food. If they have to buy food, it has to be as cheap as possible, things like ramen noodles, high in salt. All that food is not that great for you but it’s the cheapest option.”

Smith advises concerned citi-

who wish to help combat food deserts to contact Catholic Charities’ intake call center for volunteer opportunities, 718-722-6001. However, if Catholic Charities is not within reach, there are multiple local parishes, community organizations, and city

councils that also do pantry work. Some of the bigger organizations she cites are NY Caress and Food Bank for New York City. The problem may seem impossible to overcome, but the work begins on a ground level. No deed is too small!



# Mental Health Awareness: Growth and Acceptance

BY NUZHAT JANNAT



*Photo Credit: Snayini Das  
(Instagram: @d\_snayini\_photography)*

Society has historically stigmatized depression and anxiety, creating the false impression that such mental states can be easily fixable, thus reducing the magnitude of their severity. But mental illness is so much more complex an issue; people must be informed on the different types of mental illnesses and the variety of treatment options for each one so they can help their peers who may be struggling.

In the past, people who had mental illnesses were deemed abnormal and filled with demons, and symptoms for common mental health issues were overlooked. Over the past ten years, there has been

a growth in people understanding and being aware of mental illness, and the term now refers to common conditions like anxiety and depression. “Our awareness is shifting, and mental health is coming out of the shadows,” says Dr. Mark van Ommeren, a mental health expert who works with the World Health Organization. In his eyes, there was no specific trigger moment for the rise of mental health awareness; there was rather a gradual increase over time that brought attention to mental health and its importance. Recently, however, there has been a great increase in mental health awareness in recent months because of COVID-19.

Since people are constantly staying at home and are stuck with the same people everyday with the same things to do everyday, things can get depressing. Kids are stuck in online school, cannot go outside as often to see their friends, which can lead to feelings of loneliness. Parents and adults who have to venture out in public for work are anxious about possibly catching COVID-19 and passing it onto their families. They also have to adapt to the various financial changes, such as earning less money or getting laid off their jobs. People have also been losing family members and friends due to COVID-19. Such experiences can be traumatizing and will put people in a state of grief.

Overall, the key things affecting mental health in this global pandemic are emotional trauma, un-healthy social experiences, grief over losing a loved one, and dealing with the anxiety of catching COVID-19 and financial issues. “There is still a stigma to depression and anxiety,” says Maurizio Fava, a psychiatrist-in-chief at the Department of Psychiatry in Massachusetts General Hospital, “so many people experience this stress, anxiety and depression, and don't necessarily

talk about it.” He hopes that the increasing awareness and access to therapy during these uncertain times will help erase that stigma, and it is.

Personally, I have seen peers and other people starting to pay more attention to mental health and how important it is to care for oneself. I constantly see self-care Twitter threads, tips to stay safe and stay calm during the pandemic, and posts that educate people about numerous types of mental illnesses as well as how to help people with those illnesses. Such posts and threads are helpful and refreshing to see because it shows that people actually care about mental health and want to spread awareness. Due to this growing attitude of acceptance towards mental health in the media, many people are reaching out for therapy and other means of telemedicine. In March 2019, the Massachusetts General Hospital only saw 5% of its patients through telepsychiatry (video or phone call). But as of March 2020, they saw 97% of their patients through telepsychiatry, including the numerous number of people newly enrolled.

In addition, by prompting school administrations to implement an inclusive and mental health-positive curriculum, students would be more encouraged to embrace treatment and acknowledge these kinds of illnesses if experienced. Incorporating an effective mental health program would promote the importance of maintaining the emotional well-being of students, shed positive light on good decision-making, ensure a secure school environment, reinforce healthy mental and social development, and teach them how to deal with their illness in a safe manner. It is also important that children recognize these symptoms as soon as possible so that they can speak up and get help in the early stages of their illness.

Educators and staff should be knowledgeable enough in the protocols necessary when addressing mental health issues amongst their students. When students start acting distant, engage in violence or verbal aggression, exhibit drastic changes in mood or personality, or have extreme difficulty paying attention or staying put, they should know how to detect these

warning signs, know who to go to for help, and how to seek additional resources and support.

Another thing people can do to help further educate the public on these issues is confront those who shame mental illness or create a false perception surrounding such ill-nesses, thus perpetuating dangerous misinformation about what constitutes as one. There are people who tend to make fun of people with mental illness by calling them weak, broken, worthless, stupid, foolish, and much worse derogatory terms. The LGBTQ+ community also falls victim to this degradation, with members sometimes being called mentally ill and or “sick in the head”. However, calling out blatant bigotry should be followed by educating offenders about what is and is not a mental illness to create a more accepting environment.

Everyone should be educated on the complexities of mental health so they can take care of themselves and help others who may be struggling. Not to mention, this pandemic has greatly impacted the mental health of millions of people, which has contributed to a growing awareness centered around one’s mental well-being. More people are talking about mental health, making posts, and are educating others about mental health. The constant struggle and fight for the re-cognition of mental illness across the globe in all age groups is ongoing, something truly worth taking the time and effort to support. Remember to always check in with yourself. Take a mental health day every once in a while!



# Views on LGBTQ+ Minority Groups Over the Years

BY RAY NOBUHARA

On the last Sunday of every June, pride parades are held all over the world, with some of the biggest being in New York and San Francisco. These pride parades are held to celebrate the Stonewall riots, which happened at the end of June, 1969. In the Stonewall riots, people of the LGBTQ+ community rebelled against the police, who prevented queer people from entering bars due to the belief that they were a “disorganized” community. However, the queer community is not so small, having many subcategories.

To start off, what is LGBTQ+? A few decades ago, there were only the categories of L, G, B, and T, which stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, respectively. “Lesbian” describes women who are attracted to other women; “gay” refers to men who are attracted to other men; “bisexual” describes attraction to both sexes, women and men; “transgender” is a term referring to an individual who does not identify with their biological sex. There are also more subcategories of the queer community, such as asexuality, pansexuality, bigender identities, genderfluid, graygender, trigender, etc. Each of the subcategories,



including the most minor ones, all have a flag to represent themselves. The flags symbolize acceptance because the LGBTQ+ community are being recognized in society.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 92% of LGBTQ+ people who live in America believe that the society now is more accepting than ten years ago. In addition, same-sex marriage is now legal in many nations. In a personal interview, Julian Huang, a Stuyvesant sophomore, talks about being an ally to the community in a personal way: by having a close LGBTQ+ friend. When asked how it felt when his friend came out to him, he res-

ponded, “When the friend came out to me, I was initially a little confused. I had very little exposure to the LGBTQ community at that time, and didn't even know what it was. However, other than the initial confusion, I didn't really have a strong reaction, but simply accepted their new identity and asked how I could support them. Actively understanding your friend is even better than simply just accepting them.”

Emina Pasic, a Baruch High School sophomore who is friends with a bisexual individual, describes her reaction to their coming out as quite shocking. She says, “When my friend came out to me, I was shocked for the first couple or

seconds. However, this shock did not contribute to anything other than acceptance.” While Julian and Emina both acknowledge the importance of accepting one’s sexual preferences, their responses also highlight a level of absence when it comes to their awareness and knowledge of the LGBTQ+ community. It is important to be educated about the community because more people are coming out, and it is important to completely accept them.

Situations are also improving for the queer community internationally; acceptance rates rose by at most 90% in most countries compared to two decades ago, in countries from Mexico to Argentina to the UK to South Africa to Japan. I interviewed two friends from Japan who have friends in the LGBTQ+ community on their views and knowledge of queer individuals. One was Hinano Otsuka, a high schooler in Gunma, Japan. When asked how she felt when her bisexual friend came out to her, she responded, “I realized that someone like this exists in real life. I was able to accept her without taking any time. She is still the same person even if she identifies as LGBTQ+. Even though I was surprised at first, I accepted that it is normal to be LGBTQ+ identifying.”

The second was Kasumi Senuma, a high school freshman living in Tokyo. When asked if she had any challenges accepting one of her friends who identifies as a

lesbian, she responded, “I did not have any challenge. I am not going to change how I will interact with her, and I want her to talk with me whenever she is suffering. I think that this is the time to start accepting people of LGBTQ+. I want to continue being friends with her forever.”

Hinano and Kasumi have accepted their friends from the bottom of their heart. Unfortunately, they both admitted that they had little exposure to the LGBTQ+ community. It is interesting to know that even in a country where same-sex marriage is prohibited, people believe that awareness and acceptance are important.

However, even with all the growing progressive outlooks on the queer community, members still face acts of discrimination. One of the biggest differences between society now and society back in the 90s is the overall attitude towards the queer community. People who identified as LGBTQ+ were not able to comfortably display affection towards their partner in public, such as kissing and going on dates.

Not only was it considered an embarrassment to be queer but it was also associated with mental illness. In many cases, people who came out or were caught in a queer relationship were hospitalized.

Gay or lesbian people often prefer not to reveal their sexuality out of fear that they will be viewed as “weird.” Simon Li, a Bronx High School of Science gay-identifying

Asian-American alumnus, realized that he was gay when he was twelve years old. When asked about his experience of coming out, he responded, “One of the biggest coming out experiences I’ve had was also one of my first ‘real life’ coming out experiences. During first period, a classmate made a very homophobic comment, and I stood up and countered the comment, asserting that it was very offensive, but also coming out in the process. Subsequently, I suffered a few months of harassment, and have been physically assaulted on and off campus, including attempts on my life.

Lacking an adequate support network and unable to come out at home due to the inherent risks, I fell deep into depression and suicide attempts.” However, “it was not difficult for me to accept myself as a gay person when I discovered that I was gay. I just took it as a characteristic of mine.” Simon experienced harassment in school by homophobic peers, even when he was able to accept who he is.

Felicia Jennings-Brown, a Bronx High School of Science sophomore who identifies as pansexual, says, “I knew I wasn’t straight once I started considering what genders I was attracted to, and the ‘normal’ idea of exclusively being attracted to the opposite gender didn’t seem right. At the present I don’t have too many challenges – the occasional weird stares when I walk around with my



pride flags being the only exception, but in middle school I had one girl ask me, without fail, about lesbian sex every day in science.” Felicia feels more comfortable with her identity than Simon due to the difference between the acceptance from the society of today to the acceptance from the society of a few decades ago, but still feels the discrimination.

The word “pride” in LGBTQ+ pride was coined by Thom Higgins, who was an activist in the 1970s who supported gay and LGBTQ+. Also, Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, is known for saying, “I’m proud to be gay.” This quote has upfront and hidden meanings. The upfront meaning is that he is happy that he is LGBTQ+ identifying. The hidden meaning is that he finds more good than bad, and hopes that preceding generations will follow his example. One day, people may start thinking of being queer as a strength not as something to look down upon.



# The Power of Protest: A Fight Over Abortion Rights in Poland

BY MARGARET KELLY



As disappointing as it may seem, the movement towards gender equality is moving backward. Many human rights concerning reproduction and bodily autonomy are now being taken away by governing bodies. One of these is the right to safe abortions, which is in itself a largely controversial topic. People have debated about whether or not abortion should be allowed for countless years. In the United States, the liberty to choose to have an abortion was granted in the 1973 Supreme Court case of *Roe v. Wade*, thus marking a victorious moment in history for American women. However, we still have much to work on as a society when it comes to global feminist reform.

On Thursday, October 22, a tribunal in Poland ruled abortions as gravely unconstitutional, specifically when received due to fetal abnormalities. This new

decision established a near-total ban in a country that already has some of the strictest abortion laws in Europe. The Polish Constitution guarantees a right to life, and the tribunal views terminating a pregnancy based on the health of the fetus as, what the tribunal's president Julia Przylebska calls, "a directly forbidden form of discrimination." Before this decision was reached, Poland allowed abortions to be given only when the fetus was a threat to a woman's health, fetal abnormalities, or if the pregnancy was conceived as a result of incest or rape. There has been national outcry towards the Law and Justice (PiS) Party, whose new ruling severely limits when women in Poland can receive abortions, even if the fetus is diagnosed with a serious and irreversible birth defect. They have held the majority in the Polish government since 2015 and have

been bashed on numerous occasions for disintegrating the democratic normality of the nation. One of these criticisms has to do with their packing of the constitutional tribunal with its party supporters. As a party, they are also highly critical of the current protestors. According to *The Guardian*, after witnessing the extreme criticism of the ban, "...the PiS-aligned president, Andrzej Duda, suggested a new proposal that would allow abortion in the cases of life-threatening birth defects, but not for conditions such as Down syndrome." *The Guardian* predicts that President Duda's decision will only increase the force of the protests.

The case of legal abortion has been a worldwide debate for decades. What needs to be understood is that abortion is not a "modern" concept. The history of abortion can be traced back centuries. From the Ebers Papyrus, an ancient Egyptian medical text detailing abortion techniques written as far back as 1150 BCE, to the 1970s Manifesto of the 343, a document in which 343 women declared that they had received an abortion. If they had been going on for so long, why were there ever laws created against them? Well, this is mainly attributed to the influence of unreasonable patriarchal institutions. History textbooks will point towards the medical risks of abortions. They may use religion to influence people's views. They may even claim that the men declaring these restrictions were protecting women. However, it is important to consider the period. These typically caucasian men had recently lost their ability to own slaves. Could it be possible that they were simply looking for something new to control? If so, every eye must have turned towards women. With no voice in government and dozens of gender-discriminatory laws working against them, they were the obvious target. As Victorian customs became normal in the early nineteenth century, "increased female independence was also perceived as a threat to male power and patriarchy, especially as Victorian women increasingly volunteered outside the home for religious and charitable causes." As women gained independence and confidence in their opinions, the

patriarchal society of America struggled to remain in control. The simplest way to look at it is that laws against abortions were made for men to assert their power over women.

Legal or illegal, there were always methods to eliminate a pregnancy, but they were not always safe. Abortion became a much safer procedure in the 20th century when countries around the world began enacting laws to protect women's reproductive rights. How did it happen? Protest after protest. Women found their voice and began to speak out against the government's control over their bodies. So one must ask, why are we here once again, in the same position as our ancestors, protesting something that should not have to be protesting?

It is crucial to examine what an abortion ban could mean for any country, including Poland. The authorization of these laws would not stop abortion from occurring, for it may even lead to the practice of unsafe abortions, using techniques such as drinking toxic fluids or making direct impacts on the abdominal area. Women have always found a way around it, and they will continue to do so. However, it will become much more difficult, not to mention dangerous. These laws will not stop women from terminating their pregnancies. Instead, they will resort to unhealthy measures of abortion, which could damage their bodies. By forcing these laws upon their citizens, governments are indirectly condemning countless women to their deaths.

Even if governments continue with bans, there will always be subsequent protests against them. The present situation in Poland is a perfect example. The Polish government must have expected some backlash against their decision, but the sheer number of protesters seems to have surprised them. In the days following their decision, protests broke out in gigantic numbers. About a week after the tribunal made their original ruling, the Polish capital city of Warsaw witnessed the biggest protest against the Polish government in decades. Attendance ranged from 100,000 people to up to 150,000. According to CNN, analysts say that "demonstrations of this scale were last seen in

the Solidarity movement of the 1980s in Poland which led to the collapse of the government.”

These protests are something of a spectacle to behold for witnesses, whether in person or through social media. It has perfectly displayed the power of the people when they choose to use their voice against oppressive government activities. But that is not to say that there has not been significant backlash directed towards the protesters. According to various news sources, Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice Party, called the protesters “criminals.” He specifically criticized the protesters who disrupted church gatherings, stating that “if we are talking about acts of physical or verbal aggression, if we are talking about invading churches, if we are talking about insulting religious feelings, profaning places of worship, I am sorry, but the boundaries are definitely exceeded here.” Although the Church denies influencing the decision of the tribunal, in a statement delivered by

Archbishop Stanisław Gądecki concerning the accusation, he stated “for her part, however, the Church cannot cease to defend life, nor can she abandon the proclamation that every human being must be protected from conception until natural death”

The protests will not soften in force, that is certain. However, it is interesting to consider how long it will take to make a change. In the worst-case scenario — the ban being fully enacted and enforced — will this become a sort of worldwide domino effect? Will the ban simply outlast protesters in Poland? Or will it encourage similar bans in countries around the world? Nevertheless, the importance of these protests can not be understated. Women in Poland are not only fighting for their own reproductive rights; they are fighting for all women’s rights. It is up to them and all of the other women of the world to ensure that the fight for equality does not continue to move backward. Instead, it must move forward.





# The History of Sexual Assault In Pop Culture

BY JESSICA LIN

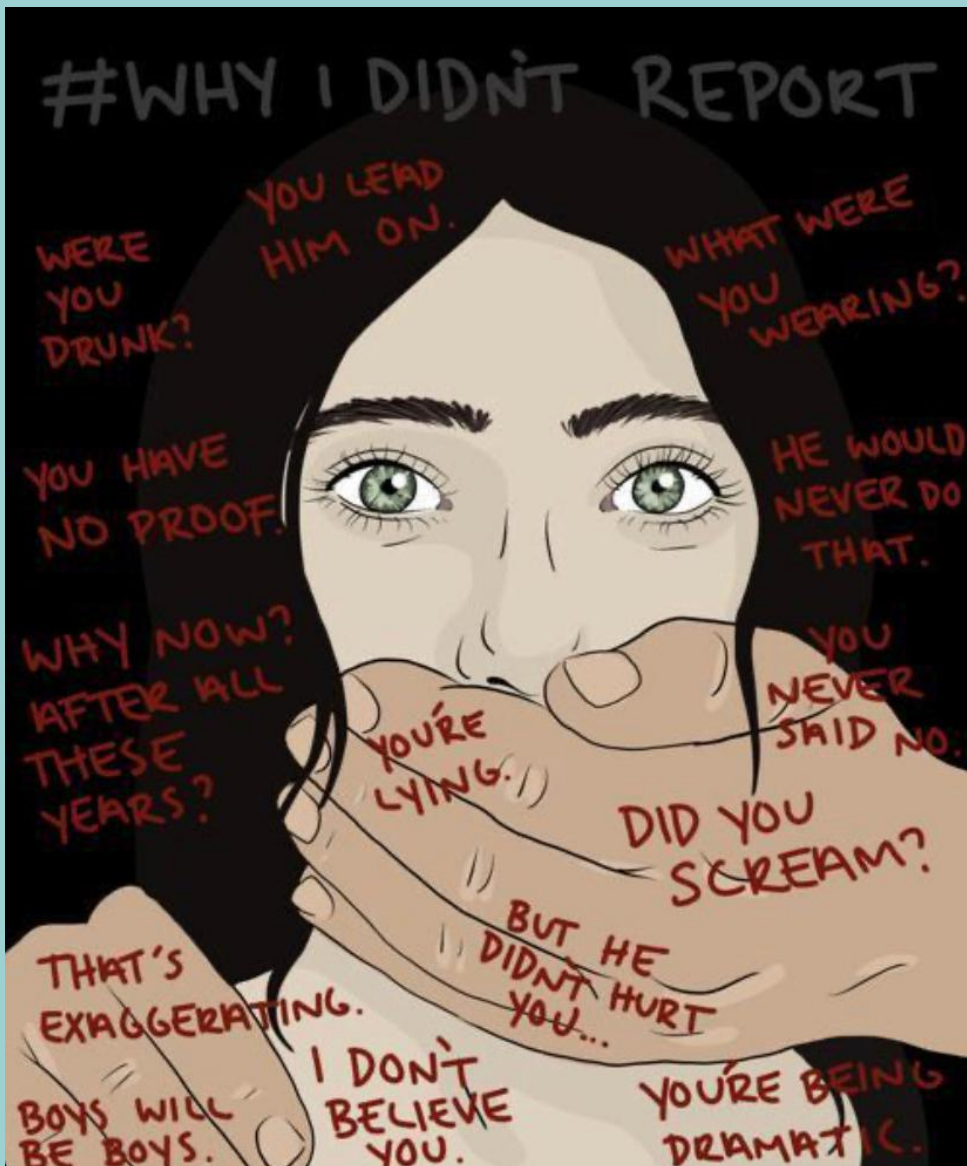
Every 73 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. From 2017 to 2018, the cases of sexual violence in America have doubled. Yet, at the same time frame, the number of reported cases has decremented from 40% to only 25%. Why are people frightened to report these

cases? It is because of the promotion of rape culture that subsists in our society. It exists everywhere. It exists in our music, shows, and other media platforms. Rape culture is not a theory. It is real and it is dangerous.

Now, what exactly is rape cul-

ture? As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, culture is “the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially by education.” By the same source, rape is defined as the “unlawful sexual activity and usually, sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against the will usually of a female or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent.” When the words “culture” and “rape” are paired together, an appalling reality is created. “Rape culture” means we have normalized and accepted rape as a normal component of life, no matter how disturbing it is. This demonstrates how public ignorance can sometimes lead to the inability to identify the sexual offenses and treasons that we witness ourselves. We need to quit our roles as bystanders and recognize the issue.

To break down the normalization of rape and sexual assault, we first need to break down and pinpoint the birth of its normalization. In history and even now, some politicians, medical professionals, and other individuals have tried to justify the legalization of rape by categorizing it somehow. The first category established was



“Gift from God” Rape, which meant that if the rape resulted in a pregnancy, then it was a “gift” meant to happen. The second category, “Legitimate Rape,” states that if a female got pregnant from rape, then it should not be legitimized as an attack. While it does not justify rape as the first category does, it does argue that the female body could “magically” block rape and prevent pregnancy willingly if it wanted to. The last category, “Enjoyable Rape,” is the notion that if a person is going to be raped, then they might as well enjoy it. Categorizing and stringing up words to expound rape does not transmute the cruel nature of this act; rape is a physical assault that results in physical and psychological damage to victims. It can traumatize them and destroy their motivation in life completely.

Aside from pro-rapist advocates, the marketing of rape in TV shows, music, and other media platforms has molded us to accept assault as less terrifying and to some degree, mundane. Sexual assault is used as a “plotline” for entertainment, and that is evident in the British drama series *Downton Abbey*, where writers used Anna’s rape to “spice up” the vanilla relationship between Anna, well-loved and well cared about by all housemaid, and Bates, a personal assistant.

Furthermore, in the critically-acclaimed TV show *Game of Thrones*, sexual assault is some-

thing that frequently occurs throughout the seasons, to the point where it can even be seen as alarming or ghastly. Yet, many fans choose to cast this fact aside and continue watching in favor of entertainment. By supporting, glorifying, and forgiving these shows, we are sanctioning and encouraging individuals to treat rape and sexual assault as something trivial and insignificant. This is how television shows have led people to systemize and accept assault in their everyday life.

Rape culture is not just conspicuous in television shows, for it exists on other media platforms, such as music. Specifically, in the rap genre, the recurring use of misogynistic and sexual themes expressed in the artists’ lyrics no doubt has had a drastic influence on the development of rape culture. Misogyny is classified as “an ideology that reduced women to objects for men’s ownership, use, or abuse.” Derogatory terms like “hoe” and “bitch,” which are acclimated to describe women, are prime examples of misogynistic words said so frequently that when we hear them, we do not stop to think about the way they are being used and their true denotation. Not to mention, such lyrics create a sense of disproportionate hierarchy and encourage sexually violent behaviors towards women.

In addition, the language the media uses to represent rape victims also equally contributes to the

normalization of sexual assault. By using words like “pretty” and “flirtatious” to describe the victims, it illustrates rape as “normal and pleasurable” instead of as a violent crime stemming from one’s desire for power and control over others. It is almost as if these descriptions justify the rapist’s actions when they should not.

The scariest thing about rape culture is not that we have been conditioned to accept it, but rather that the victims have been conditioned to believe that it is their fault. Children are told from a young age to dress, behave, and live a certain way to evade unwanted attention and consequences. Less than ten percent of sexual assault victims report to the police as a result of this societal mindset. When a case is brought to the public, society questions the victims’ credibility to the point where the victims themselves question whether they have caused their suffering.

For instance, women are often accused of “provoking” the abuse. They are questioned if they were “good” or “bad.” As stated by Thacker, a pre-trial Officer at Administrative Office of the United States Courts, “‘Good’ women are the ones who are not promiscuous, who were not drunk at the time of the assault, and who followed all the ‘rules’ to avoid being raped; conversely, ‘bad’ women are the ones who violated one or more of the ‘avoiding sexual assault’ guide-

lines that the rape culture has laid out for them.” If a woman falls into the “bad” category, they are told to be responsible for their actions.

On the other hand, male victims are frequently not subject to the same questions regarding their prior sexual history, choice of dress, physical appearance, or whether or not they imbibed drugs or alcohol. It should not be normalized in our culture to give offenders the benefit of the doubt and to question victims’ stories. Sexual assaulters should be held responsible for their actions, not victims, who should have the right to dress and go wherever they desire. In order to properly handle how our justice system addresses rape cases, we must first address the needs of rape victims directly. To do so, a shift in focus needs to be made to encourage victims to feel safe and unfettered in reporting cases. Why are the interests of perpetrators in rape cases given priority over the protection of survivors? Instead of degrading, humiliating, and blaming victims, we need to take action upon those who believe there are no consequences for assaults.

Additionally, we need to continue to work toward dismantling rape culture by teaching men not to rape instead of women not to be raped. We need to fully learn what rape culture is and educate others on the monster that we are allowing to grow. We need to discourage directors, songwriters, and other individuals from deprecating victim’s

stories, justifying rape, and watering down the severity of such sexual assault cases. Rape culture has stemmed from a history of schemes and plots, but we can start undoing the damage by simply educating and acknowledging the issue. By letting

ourselves accept the rape culture evident in our daily life, we are corrupting ourselves into the people we are fighting against. Now more than ever, it is absolutely vital for us to stand up to this societal crime, for the sake of our future generations.





# Criminal Justice - Righteous or Racist?

BY JOSEPHINE KINLAN



Criminal justice is defined as the delivery of justice to those who have committed crimes. More detailed definitions establish it as the laws, procedures, institutions, and policies in play before, during, and after the commission of a crime. Criminal justice aims to distinguish right from wrong, and established the precedent for preventing wrong through punishment of what is defined as a crime. The obstacle of such a system is to establish the laws and punishments for non-abidance, but the flaw in America's system is in upholding the preached morals of equality and freedom. The United States criminal justice system acts as one of the means to maintain racial inequality in the United States.

Mists of racial tensions have long shrouded the United States criminal justice system. The methods of crime prevention—like policing—were born as slave patrols during slavery. The Reconstruction Era was a time when sheriffs enforced the laws of Jim Crow, where race was intrinsically tied to the law. To say that methods of policing nowadays are dearth of the racial judgement they were built by is to deny many studies

that have statistically concluded otherwise.

African Americans are jailed at a rate over five times the rate at which white Americans are jailed, and in five states, that number jumps to ten. In twelve states, African Americans comprise over half of the prison population. This all contrasts the facts that African Americans constitute a smaller percentage of the citizen population than white Americans. This reality is referred to as overrepresentation, and it can be attributed to the criminal justice system that was paradoxically built on maintaining injustice.

We can understand this system as being broken down into prevention, address, and prevention. Prevention is exercised in the everyday, non-criminal expenses, like police guards, security cameras, written laws, et cetera. Throughout recent years, and following the Civil Rights Movement, the incorrectness of criminal prevention has garnered greater outcry and detestment. Racist policing and police brutality are some of the most outright corruptions of criminal prevention. In an ideal world, law enforcement completes their task without bias, but the endless list of names of those innocent yet murdered at the hands of police is more than enough to clarify that we are not in an ideal world. The preventative means of our criminal justice system is already known to be flawed. But what is hidden from the public spectrum is a whole other wave of inequality that not only unjustly attacks minorities out of already-existing biases, but reinforces their subjugated position as a form of systemic oppression.

To begin, what is defined as a crime, in many cases, should be subject to testimony. Yes, we generally know right from wrong, but when intricacies like the specific weight of a drug correlates with an

alarmingly lengthy prison sentence, one should take step back and question what degree of punishment is applicable to what degree of crime, and how each is defined. Migrating from the topic of prevention towards the intent of address, we can see that the criminal justice system often places severe consequences on non-severe crimes, like petty misdemeanors or nonviolent crimes. Drug crimes, for example, have been demonized by news media and politicians; the entire “War on Drugs” was centered around stopping them. And indeed, the United States does have a serious drug problem.

But the focus that the War On Drugs pushes is to crack down on “ghetto” neighborhoods and “keep dealers off streets,” stereotypically black citizens and often black youth. Studies show that prosecutors are twice as likely to pursue a mandatory minimum sentence to prison for a black person as for a white person, in court. The color of one’s skin should not be a determinant factor in how a crime is addressed, but leaving so much to human discretion makes it so. Additionally, minor crimes, like simple marijuana possession, have been painted as diabolical and severe in the media and by politicians.

In reality, marijuana is a common drug and is even used for medicinal purposes. But due to the exaggeration of its threat, simple marijuana possession was the most common cause of deportation from the states in 2013. It was the fourth most common cause of deportation for drug violations. Allowing police officers to impose upon people under their own discretion has permitted consistent racial profiling, and of greater importance—a lack of crackdown on whites who commit the same acts.

The issue here is not only in the leniency towards police officers, but also in the culture of those who become police officers to consistently target black persons and persons of color. The common argument here is that black and brown youth are more often criminals—a racist notion that strives to ignore the potential of injustice binding our criminal justice system together in order to retain racial hierarchy and

stereotypes. Inequality is in the lack of drug supervision on white neighborhoods and hyper-supervision of black and brown neighborhoods.

It is additionally not easy for prior convicts to re-enter mainstream society. The third intention of the criminal justice system is to prevent crime from occurring, which would suggest that once released, former convicts do not offend again, and if so, rarely. This is evidently not the case, as studies demonstrate an alarming 76% of offenders return; to claim that this is of their bad nature or circumstance is to set aside the subject and reassure oneself that nothing can be done—we can do better. The criminal justice system obviously does not succeed in its means of preventing crime. A label constantly placed on the head of former felons bars them from an unbiased re-entrance into society, and proves to be one of the main causes of their re-entrance into prison. Once branded a felon, people released from prison face difficulty in voting, education, housing, and employment.

Prison education programs are inconsistent across institutions and states, and often do not provide inmates with enough to return to the real world. One survey found that nearly 30 percent of 1300 inmates did not have a high school diploma or GED. Housing trumps former convicts, as many landlords refuse to house those formerly convicted, leading to increased homelessness, which subjects them to repeated incarceration.

Employment is extremely difficult as a former felon, because of “the box” they must check identifying their prison history. The issue with this checkbox is that it does not specify whether or not such a crime was a misdemeanor, or something more severe. What it does instead, is place all former felons into a generalization of “criminal” and “threat.” If a felon cannot find a job, or can only find one supplying minimum wage, they are more likely to turn to illegal means of making money, which increases the potential they reoffend and are reincarcerated.

Disenfranchisement—or the repute of one’s ability to vote—is one of the most impactful consequences of

the criminal justice system upon the real world lives of minorities. As of this year, an estimated 5.17 million people, or 2.27 percent of eligible voters, were disenfranchised due to a current or previous criminal offense. This number has actually deescalated from its prior 6.11 million in 2016 due to legislative attempts to remedy the issue, but in years prior it had been climbing. Forty-three percent, or 2.23 million people, of those disenfranchised have completed their sentences, which means that after their “paid debt to society” was completed, they were still barred from their representational right—a reality that few are made aware of. Such a reality creates a paradox within the lives of these individuals reinstated in mainstream society: they receive the addressments of “citizen” and are surrounded by others of the same treatment and limitations, but when the time comes, they are restricted from casting their own ballots.

Disenfranchisement laws are also heavily doused in the residues of the Reconstruction Era: disenfranchisement boomed during the era, both directly and within the legal system. Violent disenfranchisement pursued in the form of white riots against black people

exercising their right to vote. In Alabama, the required voting papers were often documents that black people had little access to, while in Texas, many laws were pushed that aimed to disenfranchise black people; eventually black people were barred from certain parties.

In states like these, where scars are remnant from the Reconstruction Era, disenfranchisement still acts aggressively towards former felons, resulting in a large percent of their black populations being disenfranchised. In Alabama and Florida, around 30% of the black population is disenfranchised. As of 2016, in Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, over 20% of the black population was disenfranchised—or one in five black people. The disproportionality of the minority groups affected by disenfranchisement goes to show why such states can remain conservative for so long even with growing numbers of communities of color: laws barring them from their vote.

Not only are these statistics significant to whether or not the percentage of citizens are being accurately represented in the states, but their disenfranchisement also bars them from local elections, which have the





most profound impacts on their own lives. Disenfranchisement thus has an effect on the lives they begin once released from prison, impacting their social-wellbeing and mental health, often in a discouraging manner; it is one of the reasons many feel disconnected from society even after their reentrance. Furthermore, in many cases, people cannot revoke their right to vote after their completed sentence because they cannot afford to pay the court-ordered monetary sanctions, or—and this is purely alarming—the state is not obliged to inform them the price of their sanction.

Oftentimes, failure to pay such sanctions, even after release from prison, is punishable by return to prison, making relieved convicts subject to criminal law that normal citizens are not subject to. Overall, life out of prison demands more money and requirements from people who have already been shunned from mainstream society. Returning to society thus may not seem very sustainable, considering such circumstances.

These obstacles of reentry into society are often downplayed by the claim that criminals are characteristically bad people, and cannot change. This attitude towards felons needs to change in order for them to feel comfortable reentering society, and have even the potential to do so. If we really wished for felons to re-enter society after rehabilitation, then rehabilitation would be more enforced within the criminal justice system. The Norwegian incarceration system, for example, emphasizes rehabilitation and education, and proves to be much more successful.

All in all, the United States' criminal justice system relies on an immense amount of bias and results in too many lives disenfranchised, wasted, subjected, and subjugated—the majority of which are black and brown. Citizens are funneled into the criminal cycle in the first place, often the result of a bad choice made in a quick moment, or potentially a false conviction. Some suspects wait months for their trials, and when they finally do show up in court, their skin color might make prosecutors pursue their sentences much more aggressively than their lighter-skinned counterparts. Their sentence to prison may be years for a minor drug



offense or other misdemeanor; for children or parents, the mental impact is devastating. Children lose years of education and social development, while the families of parents live with an empty seat for years. Once out of prison, disenfranchisement, housing, and employment laws towards former felons bar them from reentry into society.

The whole system of mass incarceration is thus a system of maintaining subjugation—and not by coincidence. The racial history of the United States is enough to suggest that we truly are not living by the spontaneous consequence of the development of our country, but in the midst of the maintenance of a racial hierarchy. The system maintains a demonizing view of former felons, and criminalizes the view of black and brown Americans. The higher numbers of black and brown felons in prison pushes the narrative that they are criminals, leading to greater fear of them and harsher treatment of them by law enforcement. All in all, the aggressive culture surrounding how to handle crime actually advances it, landing more and more people into mass incarceration as the years progress, of whom are disproportionately black people and people of color. The devastating impacts on communities of color are the means in which this system acts as a form of systematic oppression.

# International Silence in the Face of Human Rights Abuses Against Uyghar Muslims in China

BY RIA ANANDJEE



The world has seen much turmoil during the year 2020, but through it all, there has been an immense growth of activism, digitally and through protesting. With a seemingly apocalyptic year, the summer saw a surge in actions demanding justice and social change in the United States specifically. Nonetheless, while youth raised awareness for important issues online, the world must go beyond raising awareness and start taking action. One of the major injustices that has gained attention is the human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims in China. What is upsetting is that it has been going

on since 2017, yet the world has since been silent.

Ever since April 2017, around 800,000 to 2 million Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities have been detained in concentration camps. The people in these camps have often been detained for little to no reason, with a majority of them having no criminal record or traces of past illegal activity. Their only “crime” is being Muslim; practicing their religion has given them the title of “extremists.” Because of China’s harsh censorship, little is known or confirmed about what actually goes on in these concentration camps. China

presents them in a positive light calling them voluntary re-education camps to counter extremism, but detainees who have managed to escape publicly recall the grim conditions of these camps: overwhelmingly prison-like with cameras and microphones overseeing and auditing their every move. Detainees also describe experiencing torture, intense interrogations, sleep deprivation, sexual violence, forced sterilization, and other forms of abuse that push many Uyghurs to the brink of death.

The unfortunate Uyghur experience goes beyond the “re-education” camps. Even outside the camps located in Xinjiang, where Uyghur Muslims make up about half of the region’s population, they are subjected to extreme surveillance and forced to renounce their faith or risk facing harsh consequences. New evidence in September shows that authorities have heavily damaged about two-thirds of the mosques (Muslim places of worship) in Xinjiang in an attempt to forcefully assimilate millions of Uyghur Muslims into their atheist party’s precepts. While approximately 8,500 mosques have

been demolished, with another 7,500 sustaining significant damage, satellite imagery shows that upwards of 380 detention centers have been built since 2017. All the signs show that China is making large efforts to erase and rewrite the Uyghurs' cultural heritage.

Uyghurs are also subjected to forced labor where they take factory positions while earning little to no pay for their work. Many major fashion retailers such as Adidas, H&M, Abercrombie & Fitch, Ralph Lauren, and Calvin Klein use supply chains involving Uyghur exploitation. These brands have known about the Uyghurs' plight and the conditions they are forced to work under, yet still have not severed ties with those factories because they have not yet experienced significant reputational backlash or loss of consumers. Only recently have many of these companies and brands agreed to stop sourcing materials from factories in the Xinjiang region, but most of the Western fashion businesses have remained silent against China's actions. These fashion supply chains need to be more transparent and better educated on where their products are coming from along with being more aware of the conditions under which they are produced. Until then, raising awareness or boycotting these companies is what the general public can do.

So, how has the world responded? While much of the world,

has condemned Xinjiang's actions and the UN has demanded access to camps, little urgent action has actually been taken. The Trump administration recently passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act to impose sanctions on any foreign individuals or businesses that are involved in the abuses. Regardless, this has not been enough to push China into establishing permanent social reform. With the United States' critical role in China's international trade and economy, our nation has the power to bring an end to the Chinese repression of Uyghurs. First, an international coalition must be formed to put economic and diplomatic pressure on China to address the violence against the Uyghurs. This coalition would include many influential and powerful nations, like the US, Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and other members of the UN that have

already vocally expressed their disapproval of China's actions, and Muslim-majority nations such as Saudi Arabia. While the coalition will not necessarily stop China's actions, it can stop them from expanding the torture of Uyghurs.

A more direct approach would be to economically pressure China until it succumbs. America has been complicit with China's mass surveillance in Xinjiang because American firms such as Hewlett Packard and Intel Corporation have provided technologies that allow for China's mobile apps and facial recognition software to track Uyghurs. In addition, maintaining sanctions and penalties against Chinese officials and organizations will threaten financial impact that could push them to stop inflicting upon the Uyghurs' human rights.

Apart from targeting China, we as a nation must also do our part in supporting the Uyghurs in whatever







way we can with the resources currently have. One example would be granting entry into the country to Uyghur refugees who escaped Xinjiang. While many have fled to nations such as Kazakhstan and Turkey, their undocumented status still runs them the risk of being deported back to China. The U.S could also provide monetary assistance to Uyghur support groups, which provide food and shelter to refugees and Uyghurs in Xinjiang. With greater connections between U.S. officials and the Uyghurs, the

American response can have greater scope and impact. While 2020 has been tumultuous enough, we cannot forget about these issues. The surge of activism must remain consistent until the social change we are fighting for is achieved. Constantly raising awareness about the Uyghur experience in Xinjiang is important, but the United States administration and international powers need to support activist efforts and ask for transparency from the Chinese government. Uyghurs in China

deserve better, and the world needs to do a better job of preventing such human rights abuses. The world has been silent for so long; it is high time we stop being complicit and start taking action.

# How Environmentalism Connects to Different Forms of -Isms

BY THE JOURNALISM COMMITTEE



*Photo Credit: Snayini Das (Instagram: @d\_snayini\_photography)*

In today's world, there have been different values that are now escalating further into harming society. This leads into being looked as a form of discrimination, which is the unjust treatment of different categories of the human community or certain things. This treatment can be related among many people in the world, as it is known as an "-ism." Such examples of this suffix include but are not limited to: racism, sexism, ageism, and much more. When looking at these forms

of discrimination, one must realize the role that environmentalism takes place in. Environmentalism is this movement that is carried by its political and ethical qualities, as it aims to fix the stability of the environment. By fixing it, the actions of those that harm the environment must be analyzed and corrected through performing these political, economic, and social actions. These actions must be looked at as beneficial and well thought out, as the relationship

between humanity and nature will grow stronger. Environmentalism is basically the issues of discrimination tying in with Mother Nature. It can be argued that environmentalism does not fit the essence that the other -ism words fit in. However, by analyzing these forms of discrimination and tying it in with the environment, as well as finding a solution for this issue, this argument will be affirmed.

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## **Sexism**

Many feminist principles have become more relevant with environmentalism. Women are sometimes indirectly excluded from the conversation when it comes to environmental policy-making. This means that men are able to fix the policies as much as they would like to without any intervention by women. Men will not have to do much with the biased law that makes men benefit. Women, on the other hand, will have to do a lot because they even have to cover up for what the men do. This decreases the interest shown by the women of society. To solve the world's environmental issues, it is important to address the relationship between feminism and environmentalism.

In many countries, the discriminations that women have been facing for a long amount of time have increased over the years with climate change. For example, in Bangladesh, farming is typically considered as a job for women, and since farmers are most affected by climate change, female farmers tend to suffer the environmental consequences of these natural conditions. In addition, many health departments in some countries, mainly poor countries, discriminate against women and prioritize helping men. When it comes to climate change related diseases, such as increased rates of cancer due to the depletion of ozone

layers, usually men are the first to be tended to, while women are left to die (Gender Equality in Resource Control as a Tool to Fight Climate Change).

In some low-income countries, female farmers have less access to resources and rights than male farmers. According to Project Drawdown, "on average, women make up 43 percent of the agricultural labor force and produce 60 to 80 percent of food crops in poorer parts of the world." This much contribution to the food supply deserves an equal amount of resources, but that sadly is not the case. Women smallholders have less access to land rights, education, and technology, and this inequality means lower yields. Closing the gender gap will not only improve their lives and their communities but will also increase agricultural yield, feed the growing population, and reduce the need for deforestation and subsequent carbon emissions.

The best way to solve this problem is to involve women in the policy-making process. This way, men would not be able to create a biased system that forces women to work harder to help with environmentalism. The modern policy is disregarded by women so much because they do not feel the need to listen when men are able to do whatever they would like. With a fair policy, everyone will feel the responsibility to do their own part, making greater contributions to

environmentalism. If climate change slows down, women in poor countries will also be saved from all the deadly healthcare problems of the government.

## **Classism**

Environmental health disparities are a prevalent issue especially amongst the poor communities of our countries since disadvantaged populations are at greater risk for environmental hazards. For instance, air and water quality in poor communities can lead to disease and other health conditions. The primary health conditions that are caused by environmental hazards in these disadvantaged communities are cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and mortality in general.

The Environmental Health Protection (EHP) indicates that ethnicity is highly correlated with residential location, with whites and minorities generally living in completely distinct areas, and this differential location brings different health risks associated with them.

Determining the status of people residing in a particular location can include differences in behavior, culture, access to healthcare, economic status, and literacy levels, while determining where the household resides. These are used to judge whether socio-economic inequities exist. Greater monitoring of socio-economic status and their effects on various



communities can be key to reducing environmental health disparities.

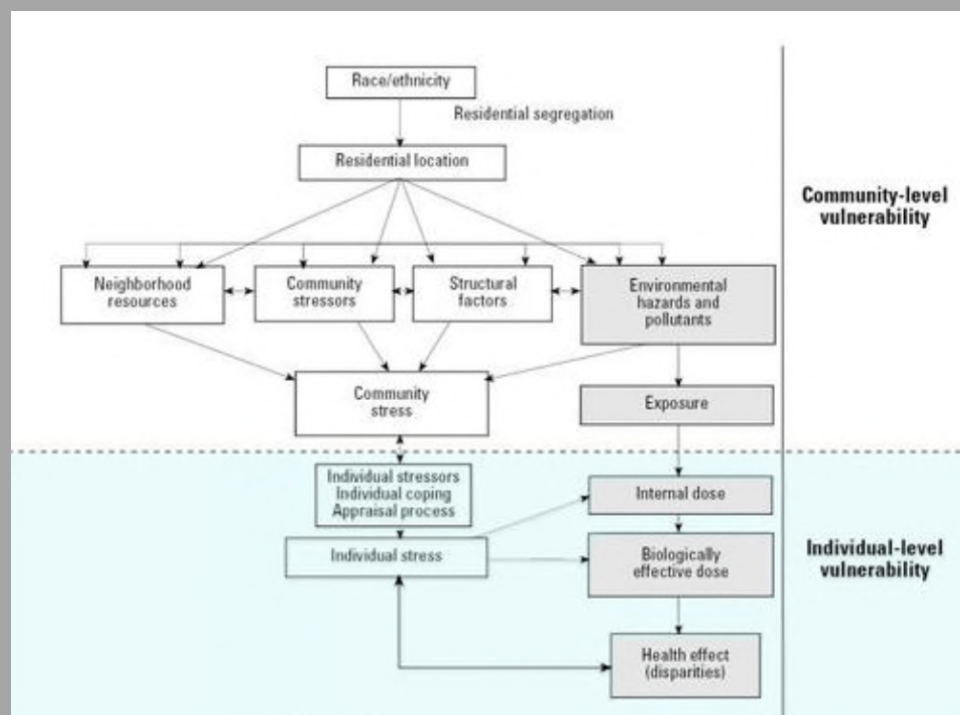
According to Oxfam International, the world's richest 10% produces half of the world's carbon emissions while "the poorest half of the world's population—3.5 billion—is responsible for just 10% of carbon emissions." However, these poorer people are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change such as natural disasters. One famous example is the 2017 Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Homes and schools were torn down, water and electricity were cut off, and the economy was and still is devastated. The poorest communities had the hardest time recovering and this pattern of devastation and loss will only worsen as the years go by and carbon emissions climb higher and higher.

The most common message for fighting climate change is that we all must slash our carbon footprints to reduce carbon emissions and the subsequent global warming, more severe natural disasters, etc. While it is most certainly true that a collective effort is necessary for a global shift in mindset and consumption and that the actions of millions can inspire real change, what about those big industries and the rich 10% that contribute the most carbon emissions? What about oil, fast fashion, plastic, and many others?

In 2004, the oil company BP revealed a carbon footprint calculator for consumers to assess their contribution to global warming. But according to experts, this was just a business tactic intended to shift the narrative of climate

change away from the biggest perpetrators to the common people. BP is one of the top 20 companies in the world that have contributed to about a third "of all energy-related carbon dioxide and methane worldwide" since 1965. It is important to note that about 90% of these emissions are from the use of their products such as petrol and natural gas, which only highlights the need to shift our energy sources from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources.

Of course, this is easier said than done: the oil and natural gas industries employ millions of people in the US alone and building renewable energy sources comes with its own consequences, too, such as increased waste and mining. But it is important to hold these big companies accountable for the emissions they produce and encourage innovation to create more sustainable options. According to the 2017 Carbon Majors Report, "If fossil fuels continue to be extracted at the same rate over the next 28 years as they were between 1988 and 2017, ... global average temperatures would be on course to rise by 4C by the end of the century." Increased global temperatures have many devastating effects, such as increasing severity of natural disasters and rising sea levels from melting glaciers. This can make our food supply vulnerable, devastate ecosystems, and displace millions of people from their homes when



*The image above displays a chart explaining the Exposure-disease-stress model for environmental health disparities.*

coastal areas (where many of the world's cities are located) flood. Many companies are promising more sustainable practices; for example, BP has pledged to cut their carbon emissions down to zero by 2050, but it is unclear how exactly they will do so. Until then, we need to demand more transparency and change from the businesses we follow. Change needs to come from both the consumer and the company.

## **Racism**

Environmentalism is often marketed as the movement that centers everyone. After all, how can a movement that is centered on the protection and improvement of our collective planet be exclusive? The chances are more likely than most imagine. One of the blatant ways environmentalism excludes certain groups of people is the lack of racial minorities involved in the eco-conversation.

Although, there has been a recent shift in environmental protesters (more people of color appearing at marches) as the world begins to take note of the complexities and intersectionality that comes with social justice. A 2014 report still found that “minorities only hold 10% of president positions, 10.5% of chairs of the board positions, and 17.6% of executive director positions in environmental grant-making organizations.” All powerful leadership positions that come with the

task of being the face of the organization. When there is a lack of diversity in environmentalism roles it sends out a subconscious message to racial minorities that this movement is not for them. Rather they can get involved but never highlight how climate change and other environmental issues are impacting their communities.

Yet, considering the historical beginnings of the eco-movement, minorities being used as accessories to push a white supremacists' environmentalism agenda is not a new occurrence. Many prominent environmentalists in history have never shied away from intertwining their racism into their work. John James Audubon, the writer of *Birds of America* (1827 - 1838), on numerous accounts referred to the enslaved black and indigenous people, who collected the majority of the specimens and samples he used to base his work off of, as “the hands” traveling along with white men. Due to this narrative and narratives similar to it that are often cited as the origins of environmentalism, “longstanding prejudices against local communities” have managed to continue from generation to generation.

For example, the water crisis in Flint Michigan that started in 2014 as a result of the city switching their water source from the treated Detroit water system to the Flint river temporarily to save money due to the city's budget deficit and being in the brink of financial ruin.

There was an outburst of concern that the river's water quality was brought up as the Flint river was known to be a disposal of industrial waste for the city's past manufacturing industry. Government officials reassured residents that the drinking water from the river was perfectly safe to consume. Though, inadequate treatment testing of the water before given to city's residents resulted in residents reporting “foul-smelling, discolored, and off-tasting water.”

Even with city residents reporting and protesting the issue to government officials, officials remained adamant about the fact that the water distributed to residents was safe and failed to act. City residents due to this had to wait 18 months for the water from the river to stop being piped to them. But, the damage was already done. Many residents reported hair loss, itchy skin, and rashes due to the water. And many studies showed that there were extremely high lead levels in water. Lead is known to cause huge levels of death, behavioral, and physical problems as well deficits in development of young children. Which was made even stark as a study found that there was an increased blood to lead level in young children that reside in Flint.

A report from the Michigan Civil Rights commission declared that the result of this tragedy in Flint was due to systematic racism. In relation to the fact that the majority of the city's residents were

black and many were in poverty there was no regard of equality in the water distribution, concerns of residents as there was denial from government officials for months, as well as the particular ramifications of the residents in this city. Ultimately the city's residents had to go to court to secure their right to purified water, as well as government action.

Contention amongst interest of larger entities and local communities have always existed for example improving air quality in the Bronx where Asthma rates are higher than the rest of NYC. Or, currently in Astoria, Queens making sure a NGO, a power plant company does not take away the community and make the health of its residents worse. But these incidents and events happen due to this repeated attack on communities vulnerability of being majority minority communities where larger entities feel they are able to exploit, deny and get away with these actions even when it goes against their own legislative agenda due to the balance of powers of communities and large entries. And the trend does not stop on the local level it transcends.

Another contributor to the current dilemma of race and environmentalism is former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt and his Smithsonian-Roosevelt African Expedition in Kenya. From 1909 to 1910, Roosevelt and his party killed over 11,000 animals. This exped-



ition gave way to trophy hunting, a sport where the majority of participants are wealthy and white. A common misconception about the sport is that it funds the majority of wildlife conservation in Africa. However, there is no definitive proof that trophy hunting is beneficial to conservation efforts. In fact, trophy hunting is often used as justification for imperialism and colonization expeditions in underdeveloped countries.

The claim of Western civilization aiding these countries in environmental movements does not hold much weight either. Earlier this year, multiple abuse allegations against eco-guards funded the World Wide Fund for Nature, a well-known conservation group, were brought to light. It is important to note that the majority of victims of these allegations happened to be native, people of color of underdeveloped countries.

Back in February, the UN Development Programme sent in a team to Congo to investigate the

situation. The reported abuse consisted of tribesmen being illegally arrested, confiscation of food, eviction from the forest (where many of the natives reside), and tribe women being forced to disrobe and walk around like the children do. The UNDP report from January 6, 2020 states "It [the abuse] is also preventing the Baka from pursuing their customary livelihoods, which in turn is contributing to their further marginalization and impoverishment."

## **Heterosexism**

Heterosexism is assuming that everyone one meets is heterosexual, as well as the attitude that comes along with it. It also includes believing that heterosexuality is the only "normal" sexuality, as well as displaying systemic homophobia in societal institutions, laws, and policies. This issue is an important issue to look at in today's changing society because heterosexism causes people to grow up with the mindset that heterosexuality is the



only correct sexuality when in reality, there are many more sexualities that are accepted and practiced in society. Environmentalism connects to this because of the fact that certain jobs that help the environment turn away LGBTQ+ workers, therefore decreasing the ability of that workplace to help the natural environment and the ecosystems they tend to. The less people employed, the less their ability is to carry out their job.

Some may argue that homosexuals have all the rights they need and do not need to fight for more rights to keep themselves in a normal place in society as well as to keep from standing out. They mainly believe that homosexuality is the fall of the human race and it should not be accepted. "When you see there's a crumbling of the moral foundation of the country, you see the attack on natural marriage and the family that has been a part of... not only the moral foundation and the upbringing of our children but the teaching of sexual roles and the development of human sexuality in our culture.

When these fundamental institutions are attacked and destroyed and weakened and abandoned, you get what we are now seeing and that is a flood of these disturbed people in our society that are causing great, great pain," says Ted Nugent, NRA Board Member. However, heterosexuals have more privileges than the LGBTQ+ community in society.

This includes marriage, being able to safely display affection, increased opportunity for employment, receiving approval and validation from the religious community, openly dating, raising children with no questioning or threats, adopting children without threats, etc. In addition, it is dehumanizing to call heterosexual marriage a "natural marriage."

Homosexuality is not "attacking and destroying" society's culture, it is instead expanding and building on society. It is educating people that there is more than just woman and man, it is showing people that they are not confined to heterosexuality, it is encouraging people to explore themselves, and it is bringing people together in a community where they can feel accepted and validated.

In order to reduce and eventually erase heterosexism, people in society can do multiple things. Schools can teach about homosexual relationships in sex-ed classes, and heterosexual PDA should receive the same consequences as homosexual PDA. Workplaces can be more accepting with the people they employ, not caring about people's sexuality or gender. In general, today's society should be more educated and aware of their thoughts on the LGBTQ+ community. Being more aware and accepting will help reduce stress, discrimination, and wrongdoings against homosexuals.

With the acceptance of the

LGBTQ+ community comes the increase of employment and an increase in being able to work for and help the natural environment. It is important to protect and accept the hearts and lives of the people of our society because if this is not done, society will fall apart piece by piece. The environment needs every single person available to help keep this planet safe, healthy, and habitable.

## **Ageism**

As children, we are constantly told what to do, what to think, and how to act by the adults in our life. These figures can include parents, guardians, relatives, and teachers. Throughout every area of our lives, we are constantly reminded that "adults know better" and it is even implied that the adults in our lives know us better than we know ourselves. As the organization Youth on Board states, one of these common feelings is "Adults think we don't have our facts straight."

At times, adults and older people can lack respect for the younger generation by assuming that they are less educated or more ignorant than them. Adults have many different motives for pressing this opinion upon us, and most of them have good intentions. They may think they are protecting us from the world around us and want to shelter us. However, these methods could severely harm young people's ability to stand up for what they need and want later in life. The

Freechild Project observed that “Our society, for the most part, considers young people to be less important than and inferior to adults.” If young people’s opinions and thoughts are consistently ignored throughout their childhood and adolescence, it will lead to increased self-doubt and harm their ability to understand what they truly need. Instead, young people should be listened to, because their opinion matters as much as older people. Contrary to some adults’ beliefs, the majority of the younger generation are constantly working to become more aware of the world around them, and should have an equal

voice in environmental decisions. These decisions will affect everyone, no matter what age they are or what generation they belong to.

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In order to fight climate change, people of all genders, races, classes, sexualities, and ages need to come together to solidify an effective and lasting impact. We need to fight sexism to make sure that women are not underrepresented when making policies or disadvantaged when pursuing their careers. We need to fight racism to make sure that people of all races are able to go for the job they want without any

obstacle blocking their path. We need to fight classism so that big corporations are held accountable for their actions and the poor are not completely devastated by climate issues. These different values could be small and very subtle, but the big picture needs to be looked at. By being able to fight for something now, change will be made in the long run. If nothing is being done to strengthen the moral aspects of this world, there will be consequences that will not be beneficial at all. So, it is all on the table; it is now or never.



*Photo Credit: Snayini Das (@d\_snayini\_photography)*

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